



Stopping the War for Tripoli

Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°69

Tripoli/Brussels, 23 May 2019

What's new? Almost two months have passed since war erupted between forces loyal to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and groups aligned with the Tripoli government in Libya. Fighting has raged on the capital's outskirts, causing at least 510 deaths, but neither side has been able to deal a decisive blow.

Why does it matter? Both sides view the war as existential, and reject calls for an unconditional ceasefire: Tripoli demands that Haftar's troops withdraw to eastern Libya; Haftar wants the capital under his control. Both have put in motion a cycle of internal and external mobilisation that points to protracted regional proxy conflict.

What should be done? The parties and their external backers should acknowledge that neither side can prevail militarily and stop pouring oil on the fire. They should conclude an immediate ceasefire entailing a partial withdrawal of Haftar's forces from the Tripoli front lines and give the UN the chance to restart peace talks.

I. Overview

Almost two months have passed since Libyan National Army (LNA) forces commanded by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar marched on Tripoli from their base in eastern Libya in an attempt to seize the capital. They expected a swift victory, banking on the belief that key units in the Tripoli area would remain neutral or switch sides. But they miscalculated: rather than swooping into the capital, they became stranded on its outskirts, settling into a war of attrition with forces from Tripoli and Misrata nominally loyal to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and its Presidential Council, headed by Faiez Serraj. Nevertheless, Haftar is claiming success and, seeming to believe victory is within reach, refusing calls for a cessation of hostilities. On their side, forces nominally loyal to the GNA have pegged the resumption of talks to the LNA's complete withdrawal from western Libya. Otherwise, they say, they will push out the LNA by force. Both sides see themselves as pursuing a just cause and, convinced that their military objective is achievable with a little outside help, have shown signs of doubling down.

Meanwhile, the fighting has created a diplomatic vacuum: the UN special envoy has seen the political process he initiated evaporate, and rifts among Libya's external stakeholders have been laid bare, leaving the UN Security Council paralysed. With no military solution on the horizon, the two sides will have no choice but to return to the negotiating table sooner or later. The UN's reputation may have taken a hit, but the world body remains the only actor capable of managing peace talks. External ac-

tors need to acknowledge these realities, and throw their support behind an internationally monitored ceasefire that would require at least a partial withdrawal of Haftar-led forces from the Tripoli front lines. It will be no easy task, given the zero-sum logic that drives both the LNA's offensive (and that Haftar's regional backers share) and the Tripoli government's demand that Haftar forces leave western Libya entirely.

But simply letting the war take its course, and possibly escalate further, should not be the only option. International stakeholders, including the U.S., need to achieve a new consensus on Libya, genuinely empower the UN special envoy, call for an immediate ceasefire and press the warring sides back to the table.

For their part, the two sides should reassess their assumptions and acknowledge that neither has the capability to prevail militarily. For Haftar and other LNA commanders, as well as the east-based government, reassessment means softening their bellicose rhetoric and publicly accepting the Tripoli government as a legitimate negotiating partner. In turn, Serraj and military forces allied to the GNA should be prepared to commit to negotiations that could well overturn the UN-installed institutional framework of which they have been the prime beneficiaries. Once a ceasefire is in place, an immediate priority should be the resumption of talks to resolve a banking crisis that, if left unaddressed, could impoverish the majority of the population, reignite the battle for the capital and bring Libya to ruin.

II. Military Stalemate

Now in its seventh week, the fighting in and around Tripoli has deadlocked. It has left at least 510 people dead, including 29 civilians, and displaced 75,000 residents from the capital.¹ Starting from their bases in eastern and southern Libya on 4 April, and backed by allies in the west, Haftar's forces took their adversaries by surprise, entering a ring of Tripoli neighbourhoods from Zahra in the west to Ain Zara and Wadi Rabia in the south east, and seizing the (non-functioning) Tripoli international airport.² GNA forces mobilised within a week, however, and managed to push the LNA and its allies out of the capital's western periphery and most of Ain Zara.

Since then, both sides have made occasional advances before retreating along a front line in the capital's southern suburbs some 10-20km in width, with neither side able to take new ground and score a decisive victory.³ The LNA has remained stuck in positions around Wadi Rabia and the international airport in the face of fierce resistance, and forces loyal to the Tripoli government have failed to realise their plan to expel Haftar's forces from greater Tripoli and towns along the LNA's fragile supply lines, such as Tarhouna and Ghariyan.⁴

¹ The total death toll is taken from a tweet by the World Health Organization in Libya, @WHOLIBYA, 7:47 am, 21 May 2019. The civilian fatality toll is taken from "Libya: Tripoli Clashes Situation Report No. 24", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, 17 May 2019.

² Crisis Group Alert, *Averting a Full-blown War in Libya*, 10 April 2019.

³ Crisis Group interviews, Libyan politicians, Tripoli and Misrata, April-May 2019.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Misratan politicians, Misrata and Tripoli, late April 2019. Misratans perceive the presence of LNA forces in Tarhouna as a great threat because the two cities are only 100km apart. Since mid-April, Misratan politicians and notables have been trying to reach out to their counterparts in Tarhouna to persuade local forces there to stand aside and let Misratan forces at-

Even the use of airpower and drones has not significantly changed the balance on the ground. Between mid-April and mid-May, the LNA repeatedly carried out air and drone strikes against the bases of armed groups inside Tripoli and nearby towns such as Zawiya and Tajoura and against pro-GNA fighters on the front lines. In turn, the GNA has used its own smaller air force to strike at LNA-held areas, such as Qasr Ben Gashir.⁵ For the time being, the LNA appears to have superior air capacity because it has more jets that are operational, and it alone has access to armed drones.⁶ Its drone attacks caused significant damage to GNA forces' equipment more than they proved effective in killing enemy fighters.⁷ The GNA also suffered the loss of its two best fighter jets (both Mirages, operating out of Misrata), with one of its pilots captured by the LNA on 7 May. The footage of the event provided the LNA with a smoking gun for its claim that the GNA is using mercenary pilots: the captive was a white man who identified himself as a Portuguese national.⁸ In turn, the GNA accuses the LNA of relying on foreign support to equip its planes and operate its drones.⁹

tack LNA positions, but leaders in Tarhouna refused, reaffirming their support for the LNA cause. Misratans say they understand that starting an open war against Tarhouna could create a backlash, because many Tripoli residents are originally from Tarhouna. Crisis Group interviews, Misratan politicians, Misrata, late April and May 2019; Libyan politicians, Rome, May 2019.

⁵ The Libyan Air Force split following the 2014 political crisis: the LNA took control of the Qadhafi-era Russian fighter jets, which were mostly non-operational, in the airports it controlled (Benghazi Benina airport and Brak al-Shati and Wutiya air bases) and refurbished them over time. It has received additional aircraft since, including air tractors fitted with rockets, and helicopters donated allegedly by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in what would be a violation of the UN arms embargo. According to aviation experts, the LNA had 15 operational aircraft when the battle for Tripoli started in April: eight MiG-21s, three MiG-23s, two Su-22s and two Mirage F1s. Arnaud Delalande, "The rise of Libya's renegade general: how Haftar built his war machine", *Middle East Eye*, 14 May 2019. On its side, the Tripoli government has a smaller fleet stored at Misrata air base on the war's eve: two Mirage F1s and about a dozen other fighter jets, mainly MiGs, L-39s and G-2 light attack aircraft. Many of these planes were non-operational, however; security experts estimate that only eight or nine were deployable. Crisis Group interviews, Misratan politicians, Misrata, 25 April 2019; Crisis Group phone interviews, Western security experts, Tunis, Tripoli, Paris, 17-18 May 2019. Speaking before the war, a French diplomat said the LNA had "far superior airpower" compared to the GNA. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, February 2019. The LNA also has more combat helicopters. According to a Western security source, the LNA can count on approximately twenty, while the "GNA has very few". Crisis Group phone interview, Tunis, 17 May 2019. During the first five weeks of war in Tripoli, the LNA lost one of its planes, while the Tripoli-aligned forces lost three, including its two Mirage F1s. In mid-May, a Misratan politician admitted that they were "being hit hard from the sky". Crisis Group phone interview, 10 May 2019.

⁶ Foreign intelligence sources believe these drones to be the Chinese-made Wing Loong II, similar to those the UAE has used in Yemen. They suggest that the operators are stationed either at the LNA's Al-Khadim air base in eastern Libya or the Jufra air base in central Libya. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and UN official, Tripoli, 29 April 2019. According to press reports quoting a confidential 2 May 2019 report of the UN Panel of Experts submitted to the UN Security Council, the UN's sanctions monitoring body is investigating "the probable use of Wing Loong UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) variants by the LNA or by a third party in support of the LNA". "U.N. report finds likely use of armed drone in Libya by Haftar or 'third party'", Reuters, 8 May 2019.

⁷ Crisis Group phone interview, Western security expert, Tunis, 17 May 2019.

⁸ The video of his interrogation is available here. The GNA's military spokesperson denied the accusation. It appears that since 2016, the GNA has been employing foreign pilots to fly its Mirages, which the Libyan pilots in Misrata (who were brought back from retirement and are mostly in their fifties) are not trained to operate. Crisis Group interviews, Misratan politicians, Misrata, April 2019;

Despite initial setbacks and diminished flying power, GNA-allied forces appear convinced they can prevail, banking on fresh equipment, reportedly arriving from Turkey.¹⁰ The GNA's air force appears to have started carrying out night strikes since early May and to have obtained surveillance drones. The fact that the LNA has carried out no precision airstrikes in Tripoli since 14 May would suggest that the GNA's acquisition of new technology has made a difference.¹¹ Sources in Tripoli boasted in mid-May about "good surprises", hinting at new military equipment.¹² On 19 May, a shipment of several dozen armoured vehicles was unloaded in Tripoli port, but it is unclear if that cargo, or others that might have arrived undetected, included any other aviation-related equipment.¹³

Some Western military experts caution against dismissing the LNA's failed advance as a setback, saying Haftar is pursuing an intentional "strategy of attrition" aimed at drawing out the enemy, a claim numerous LNA sympathisers also make.¹⁴ But in terms of fighting power and military arsenal deployed, the two sides appear approximately equal for the time being.¹⁵

Crisis Group phone interview, Western military expert, Tunis, 17 May 2019. On its side, the LNA has been able to train young pilots. In 2016, a batch of 35 pilots appears to have graduated from an Egyptian air academy. Delalande, op. cit. There are no reports of foreign pilots operating the LNA-controlled planes, but that does not mean there are none.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli-based and Misrata-based politicians and military officials, Tripoli and Misrata, late April 2019. The UN Panel of Experts' annual reports cite several cases of foreign support to the LNA's aviation build-up. See, for example, "Letter dated 1 June 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council", UNSC S/2017/466, 1 June 2017.

¹⁰ Crisis Group phone interviews, Tripoli- and Misrata-based politicians, European diplomats, Tripoli, mid-May 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group phone interviews, Western security experts, Tunis, 17 May 2019.

¹² Crisis Group phone interview, Tripoli-based politicians, Tripoli, mid-May 2019.

¹³ On 18 May 2019, Libyan social media accounts shared footage showing several dozen new armoured personnel carriers, which appear to be Turkish-made BMC Kirpi, being unloaded from a Turkish ship docked in Tripoli port. See the tweet by Ali Ahmed, researcher, @LibyaPro2, 11:08 am, 18 May 2019; and the Facebook post by Misrata Channel, 18 May 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, European military expert, Tunis, May 2019; LNA sympathisers, Tripoli, late April 2019.

¹⁵ Exact numbers of fighters deployed on either side so far are not available. Western intelligence sources estimate that there are "a few thousand men" on either side. They also confirm that in terms of "technicals" (Toyota pickups fitted with heavy artillery) and weaponry they would appear balanced but declined to give exact numbers: both have "hundreds" of technicals; both have access to long-range artillery such as Grad rockets; they appear to have a roughly equal number of tanks, the exact quantities of which remain unclear. Crisis Group phone interviews, Western security experts, diplomats, Tunis and Tripoli, May 2019. But one military expert cautioned: "The battle so far would appear to suggest a balance of forces and would indicate that neither side can prevail. But from a strictly military point of view I would say that is incorrect. Aside from the numbers, we have to bring into the equation command and control, training and logistics organisation, and on those points the LNA scores higher. Motivation is obviously another factor and on that the anti-Haftar forces might be stronger, because they are defending themselves". Crisis Group phone interview, European security expert, Tunis, 17 May 2019.

III. Slim Chances of a Ceasefire as Regional Actors Step In

Confident that they have the means to win the war, both sides have ignored calls for a cessation of hostilities from the African Union, the EU and a number of member states.¹⁶ Tripoli authorities have refused a ceasefire so long as LNA forces remain in proximity to the capital and have posited an unconditional LNA withdrawal from the entirety of western Libya as a prerequisite for even considering one. They view Haftar's advance on the capital as a violation of international law and an act of aggression whose sole aim is to enable Haftar to take over the country, impose military rule and return Libya to Qadhafi-era authoritarianism. In their eyes, a ceasefire based on current fighting positions without a guarantee that Haftar will respect them would amount to giving his forces time to rest and rearm before resuming their assault on the GNA and the capital.¹⁷

From its side, the LNA has shown no interest even in outlining conditions for a ceasefire. Despite suffering setbacks in Tripoli's periphery, Haftar urged his forces to continue their advance on the capital during Ramadan, which began on 5 May.¹⁸ Some LNA supporters seem to believe that Haftar has set the holy month's 20th day as the date for entering the capital; that day, which falls on 25 May this year and which Haftar referred to in a 4 April speech, is laden with Islamic symbolism because it marks the Prophet's liberation of Mecca.¹⁹ Even if that day sees an escalation, LNA's conquest of Tripoli is unlikely, due to the strength of Haftar's foes, as exhibited so far. Those backing the LNA, including the eastern government (not recognised internationally), frame their operation as necessary to "liberate" Tripoli from armed groups whom they call "terrorists" or "extremists", and to "free" the Libyan state apparatus from the shackles of militia rule, of which they claim the Tripoli-based prime minister, Faiez Serraj, is a victim. Only after they have taken the capital, they say, would it be possible to restart the political process.²⁰

¹⁶ The African Union called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire. See "Final Communiqué of the Summit of the Troika and Committee on Libya of the African Union", Cairo, 23 April 2019. The EU also called for a ceasefire. See "Libya: Foreign Affairs Council Statement", press release, Brussels, 13 May 2019. Italy and France also jointly called for a ceasefire. "Joint Statement by the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Enzo Moavero Milanesi", 13 May 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Misrata- and Tripoli-based officials, Tripoli and Misrata, late April 2019. The Tripoli government's interior minister underscored that his side would not accept a ceasefire until Haftar's forces are pushed back or withdraw voluntarily to eastern Libya. Crisis Group interview, Fathi Bash Agha, Misrata, 26 April 2019. Tripoli-based Prime Minister Faiez Serraj reiterated his refusal to accept a ceasefire along the current front lines during his tour of Rome, Paris, Berlin and London on 8-14 May 2019. Crisis Group phone interviews, European diplomats, Berlin, Tripoli, Tunis, May 2019.

¹⁸ Haftar's written statement read out by LNA spokesperson Ahmed al-Mismari and broadcast by the (pro-LNA) Libya al-Hadath TV channel, 6 May 2019, available on the channel's Facebook page.

¹⁹ Haftar's speech on the Tripoli operation aired on the Libya al-Hadath TV channel on 4 April 2019. This date coincides with what Haftar had separately stated to European officials would be his military operation's third phase – the takeover of military bases in the capital. According to LNA officials, phase one started on 3 April with the deployment to Tripoli, and phase two on 25 April, when the LNA began to target Tripoli militias. Crisis Group phone interview, Western diplomat, May 2019.

²⁰ Crisis Group phone interviews, LNA supporters, Benghazi and Tripoli, late April 2019. See also the remarks of Abd al-Hadi al-Hawij, foreign minister of the east-based interim government loyal to

And here is the rub: by setting maximalist demands, and given the relative balance of forces, the GNA and LNA both increase the chances of a protracted and deadly war, one that is virtually bound to see increased foreign meddling. The deceptive rhetoric of imminent triumph – and, in the LNA’s case, of the “war on terror” – is likely to encourage their respective external backers to keep supplying military equipment, ammunition and funds to urge their proxies toward victory. For this, the LNA is counting mainly but not exclusively on Egyptian, Emirati and Saudi support.²¹ The allegation that Islamists have infiltrated the ranks of GNA-aligned forces in particular appears to have struck a chord: “There are different militias fighting there [in Tripoli] with different agendas and some of those who are fighting with the GNA scare us”, said United Arab Emirates (UAE) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash.²² On the other side, GNA-aligned forces have been tapping Turkish and Qatari supplies to ensure that Libya does not fall to Haftar and, by extension, Ankara’s and Doha’s regional foes.²³

the LNA, aired on France 24 (Arabic) TV channel, 9 May 2019. During his meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in Rome on 16 May 2019, Haftar underscored his refusal to consider a ceasefire before taking Tripoli, promising “a unity government and elections in the future”. Crisis Group phone interview, Italian diplomat, 17 May 2019. As one Benghazi resident suggested, “it is inconceivable for Haftar to agree to a ceasefire with Serraj, because it would mean recognising from his side that there is a legitimate political interlocutor to negotiate with on the other side. And that completely goes against his narrative”. Crisis Group phone interview, 16 May 2019.

²¹ Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have backed Haftar in different ways (ranging from intelligence support to training and material supplies) since 2014. Since the start of the Tripoli offensive in April 2019, there is evidence that Riyadh has given Haftar financial support or at least the promise thereof. Jared Malsin and Summer Said, “Saudi Arabia promised support to Libyan warlord in push to seize Tripoli”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 April 2019. How much Riyadh has promised or provided Haftar remains unknown; a Western diplomat speculated that it could be as much as \$1 billion. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, April 2019. Although the UAE says Haftar had not informed it of his intention to move on Tripoli, Emirati support to him has continued. According to a Western diplomat based in the UAE: “The UAE was initially surprised by Haftar’s push. But once Washington green-lighted it, they said ‘OK, let’s take advantage of this opportunity’. They see it as a low-cost investment that could yield disproportionate returns for their interests”. Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, 15 May 2019. An Egyptian official confirmed that the UAE and Saudi provided financial support to Haftar. Crisis Group phone interview, Cairo, 16 May 2019.

²² Remarks delivered by Anwar Gargash at a press briefing attended by Crisis Group, Abu Dhabi, 15 May 2019. Gargash made a similar point in an op-ed underscoring that Islamist militias in Tripoli derailed an attempted agreement between Haftar and Prime Minister Faiez Serraj negotiated in Abu Dhabi in February: “Regrettably extremist militias in Tripoli subsequently derailed this agreement in a bid to take control of Libya’s future, Islamist and jihadi groups uniting in support of Al Sarraj”. “Dr Anwar Gargash: Our solution for Libya”, *The National*, 19 May 2019.

²³ Aside from the 19 May delivery of Turkish armoured personnel carriers (see footnote 13), there is no visual evidence of Qatari and Turkish supplies. But a few Tripoli- and Misrata-based GNA officials have intimated that their side has already started receiving a broader range of military supplies from these two countries. Crisis Group interviews, Libyan officials, Tripoli and Misrata, late April 2019, and phone interviews, mid-May 2019. A European diplomat confirmed that some supplies appear to have arrived from Turkey, and suggested that these might be coming not just by ship but also by air into Misrata. Crisis Group phone interview, European diplomat, Tripoli, mid-May 2019. Qatari officials speaking at the outset of the offensive confirmed that they stood ready to support anti-Haftar forces. Crisis Group interview, Qatari senior official, Doha, 8 April 2019. A well-informed Libyan confirmed that a small batch of supplies, as well as funds, had arrived “courtesy of Qatar” without defining what the package comprised. Another person, however, downplayed

The net result would be a proxy war reflecting a primary geopolitical rift in the Gulf region, with no guaranteed winner. As time passes, the war could morph into a more multifaceted conflict, including over financial resources, namely if the LNA, strapped for cash, leverages its control over most of Libya's oil and gas infrastructure to secure access to state funds, of which it is now deprived.²⁴ What the UN Secretary-General's special representative, Ghassan Salamé, said in his sobering speech to the Security Council is true: "There is no military solution to Libya. This is not a cliché. It is a fact, and it is high time for those who have harboured this illusion to open their eyes and adjust themselves to this reality".²⁵

IV. Diplomatic Paralysis

Efforts to stop the war through diplomatic channels have failed to take off. Rather than condemning Haftar for seeking to forcibly remove the UN-backed government, the White House threw its weight behind him in mid-April.²⁶ This surprise turnaround in Washington, which contradicted U.S. policy as articulated by the secretary of state, contributed to paralysis within the UN Security Council, preventing it from condemning the assault and instructing international action.²⁷ It also led European capitals, even those that, like Rome, had an initial impulse to denounce the offensive, to adopt a more complacent approach, condemning it verbally but doing little more.²⁸ The new U.S. position also emboldened Haftar's regional backers in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo to continue their financial and military support for Haftar's military assault, which an Egyptian diplomat described as Haftar's "national duty".²⁹

The UN Security Council has been conspicuous in its inaction. Ten days into the offensive, Council members could not even agree to vote on a UK-drafted resolution that called for a ceasefire. France and Russia, in particular, objected to a draft placing the blame for the escalation solely on the LNA. Both requested additional wording calling on the Tripoli government to step up its counter-terrorism efforts. But

the extent of Qatari support. Crisis Group interviews, Libyans with ties to Qatari officials, Misrata and Tripoli, 25 and 29 April 2019.

²⁴ On the financial problems affecting eastern Libya, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°201, *Of Tanks and Banks: Stopping a Dangerous Escalation in Libya*, 20 May 2019.

²⁵ "Remarks of SRSF Ghassan Salamé to the United Nations Security Council on the Situation in Libya", 22 May 2019.

²⁶ On 19 April 2019, the White House said that U.S. President Donald Trump had talked to Haftar on the phone four days earlier, when he "recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources". See "Trump backed Libyan strongman's attack on Tripoli, U.S. officials say", Bloomberg, 24 April 2019; Jeffrey Feltman, "Trumpian storm clouds over Tripoli", Brookings, 19 April 2019.

²⁷ In a 7 April statement Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared: "We oppose the military offensive by Khalifa Haftar's forces and urge the immediate halt to these military operations against the Libyan capital". "Statement by Secretary Pompeo", U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, 7 April 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Tripoli and Tunis, late April 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group phone interview, Cairo, 16 May 2019. The official refused to call the Haftar-led siege of Tripoli an "offensive" and claimed that Haftar was carrying out his "national duty" in fighting "terrorism" and militias.

diplomats agree that the U.S. played a decisive role in halting any discussion of the text.³⁰ Washington justified its rejection of the UK draft by saying it did not envisage a mechanism to ensure that the ceasefire would be respected; ultimately, its opposition prevented the draft from moving forward.³¹

Retrospectively, it is hard to see the U.S. argument as more than a cover for the pro-Haftar policy shift it had already executed but did not make public until 19 April. Nothing has changed since then. Following its closed-door consultation on 10 May, the best the Council could muster was a tepid statement expressing concern “about the instability in Tripoli and worsening humanitarian situation which is endangering the lives of innocent civilians and threatens the prospects for a political solution”, and calling on all parties to “return to UN political mediation, and to commit to a ceasefire and de-escalation to help mediation succeed”.³²

The EU Foreign Affairs Council has used the strongest wording of any international body so far to describe the war in Tripoli. Its 13 May final communiqué called the LNA’s military attack and subsequent escalation in and around Tripoli “a serious threat to international peace and security”. But the council failed to translate these words into action, limiting itself to calling on “all parties to implement a ceasefire” and return to political negotiations.³³

Had it wanted to, the council could have slapped sanctions on those accused of disrupting international peace and security, and even called on EU member states to use their resources (such as naval assets, already mandated under the EU’s Operation Sophia, or satellites) to help monitor implementation of the UN arms embargo. The fact that it did not, a EU diplomat said, attested to a “cosmic vacuum” reigning in the EU with regard to Libya.³⁴ Though European capitals officially recognise the GNA, most appear to have lost hope in it, while remaining fearful of what a Haftar takeover could entail. Aside from effecting heavy destruction to the capital, a majority fears that he will apply in Tripoli the same heavy-handed leadership style he has used in eastern Libya (where he has jailed Islamists and other political opponents, and has carried out extrajudicial killings).³⁵ This dilemma, coupled with Washington’s refusal to condemn the assault on Tripoli and France’s close ties to Haftar and his Gulf backers, has led to a policy paralysis among most EU member states.

Officially, France recognises the GNA but among European states it is the most openly supportive of Haftar, having maintained close relations with him since 2015. This goes in tandem with Paris’s strong military cooperation with Abu Dhabi and is consistent with its own counter-terrorism priorities in the Sahel, where it has de-

³⁰ Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Libya, as seen by Crisis Group on 17 April 2019. See Crisis Group Special Briefing N°1, *Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, 30 April 2019. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, London, Tunis and New York, mid- and late April 2019.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, UK diplomats, London and Tunis, April 2019. One British diplomat recalled: “To our great surprise, it is the Americans who are putting up the biggest opposition to the resolution. Washington seems to believe that the fighting in Libya has not reached a dramatic point that would warrant such a resolution and they don’t seem to be eager to have an approved resolution that is likely to go unimplemented on the ground”. Crisis Group interview, London, 16 April 2019.

³² “UN Press Elements on Libya”, press release, Permanent Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany to the United Nations, 10 May 2019.

³³ “Libya: Foreign Affairs Council Statement”, press release, Brussels, 13 May 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group written exchange, Tunis, 13 May 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Tripoli, Tunis, Berlin, Rome, April-May 2019.

ployed 3,000 troops as part of Operation Barkhane. Neighbouring Chad is a key partner in Barkhane and, in many respects, France's support for Haftar is a corollary to its longstanding backing of Chadian President Idriss Déby. Haftar and Déby are close allies, and from Paris's point of view Haftar, with his strongman inclinations, is the better partner in Libya to prevent jihadist and Chadian rebel infiltration from southern Libya.³⁶ This to the frustration of the Serraj government, which threatened to shut down operations of Total, the French oil company, in mid-May to persuade Paris to change its policy toward Haftar. Instead, French officials have accused the Serraj government of insufficient action against "terrorists" in western Libya, a position similar to that expressed by UAE officials.³⁷

Despite an earlier, more even-handed approach, Rome and Berlin appear to be coming somewhat closer to Paris's position, hesitating to explicitly denounce the Haftar offensive or call for an LNA withdrawal from western Libya – Serraj's primary request when he toured European capitals in early May. This is due in part to the U.S. change of policy: major European capitals would hesitate to take an opposite position to that of the U.S. on Libya, even more so now that the Tripoli government's main allies are Ankara and Doha. In addition, Paris's support for the LNA and more technical evaluations of Haftar's chances of succeeding militarily also appear to have factored into Europe's tepidness toward the Tripoli camp.³⁸ At least that was the case until mid-May: now, seven weeks into a war that increasingly looks like the military stalemate Crisis Group foresaw, some European officials, including potentially French ones, appear once more to be re-evaluating their assumptions.³⁹

To France's credit, and somewhat paradoxically, Macron is the only European leader to have at least called for an international mechanism to monitor a ceasefire.⁴⁰ French officials say they are looking into how monitoring could work; options include the use of radar and/or observers on the ground. Yet the chances that these ideas will take concrete form remain slim because of the difficulty of monitoring military positions in cities. The prospects are likewise dim that either Tripoli or Benghazi would accept monitoring: Haftar has rejected a ceasefire and Tripoli refuses any project that does not include the full withdrawal of Haftar's forces from western Libya.⁴¹

³⁶ Crisis Group Q&A, "Rebel Incursion Exposes Chad's Weaknesses", 13 February 2019; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°274, *Tchad: sortir de la confrontation à Miski*, 17 May 2019.

³⁷ In an interview French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared: "Haftar fought against terrorism in Benghazi and in the south of Libya, and that is in our interest, and that of Sahel countries and of Libya's neighbours. I support anybody who serves the security interests of France and of those countries who are France's friends". François Bouchon, "Jean-Yves Le Drian: 'En Libye, Haftar fait partie de la solution'", *Le Figaro*, 3 May 2019.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews and phone interviews, European diplomats, Tunis, Tripoli, Berlin, London, late April and early May 2019.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, mid-May 2019. For Crisis Group's forecast of stalemate, see Crisis Group Alert, *Averting a Full-blown War in Libya*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ "Entretien avec M. Fayez Sarraj", Élysée Palace, press release, 8 May 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group phone interviews, European diplomats, Tripoli, Tunis, 15-17 May 2019.

V. A Way Forward

Allowing the battle for Tripoli to unfold without a credible effort to push the sides to a ceasefire is very dangerous. Fuelled by foreign support, the conflict could escalate, causing immense material destruction and human suffering in the capital and surrounding areas. It could also eventually destabilise eastern Libya, Haftar's base, where tribal leaders are beginning to voice discontent over a deadly fight in the capital they consider unnecessary.⁴² In the south, the security vacuum caused by the sudden re-deployment of LNA troops to the capital in April has allowed Islamic State militants to rebound – a development that directly undercuts the logic of France's support for Haftar.⁴³ And a protracted battle for Tripoli could ignite a fight for control of the country's finances and hydrocarbon resources in other parts of the country.⁴⁴

With the GNA and the LNA refusing to halt hostilities amid diplomatic paralysis, the war in and around Tripoli is likely to drag on. At the moment, neither side seems ready for a ceasefire or a political settlement, as both are itching to score a decisive victory that would allow them to either freeze the UN-backed political framework (in the case of the GNA, which benefits from nominal international recognition and what this entails financially and militarily) or reset it in their favour (in the LNA's case).

The dynamics on the ground point in this negative direction. In particular, it is unclear whether Haftar and his supporters inside and outside of Libya will be satisfied with anything short of full capture of the state that would allow them to dictate the terms of a new political framework, with Haftar in charge. Many in Tripoli today believe that they will not and, for this reason, vow to fight on. Conversely, many in Haftar's camp do not consider Serraj a credible negotiating partner, portraying him instead as a hostage of the militias that surround him; for this reason, they dismiss the very notion of negotiations and fight on themselves.

The situation might well escalate, with weapons and equipment pouring in from abroad, but will likely end up producing another version of a stalemate, only with

⁴² Crisis Group phone interviews, residents of Benghazi and Ajdabiya, May 2019. A member of the Magharaba tribe in Ajdabiya said: "None of the tribal leaders in the east has publicly endorsed the Tripoli war. This is a clear indication they do not support it. They do not see the fight in Tripoli as benefiting the cause of Barqa [eastern Libya], and they are against sacrificing their children for something that could also be resolved politically". Crisis Group phone interview, Ajdabiya, 12 May 2019.

⁴³ Since the Tripoli offensive started, Islamic State militants have taken responsibility for four attacks in southern Libya, which they refer to as Wilayat Fezzan: in Fuqahaa (9 April), Sebha (4 May), Ghadwa (9 May) and Zilla (18 May). The Islamic State, or ISIS, has reported these attacks in its media outlets *Amaq* and *al-Naba'*. In the case of the Fuqahaa attack, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself congratulated the perpetrators in a 29 April 2019 speech. In all instances these attacks targeted Libyan LNA forces or local individuals accused of aiding Haftar's takeover of southern Libya. The LNA has accused the Tripoli government of being complicit in protecting Islamists and jihadists, and claims that ISIS fighters have infiltrated the ranks of the anti-Haftar coalition fighting in Tripoli. Some Haftar advisers have gone so far as to claim to Western diplomats that al-Baghdadi is residing in Misrata and "is co-ordinating operations against the LNA from there". Crisis Group interview, Italian diplomat, Tripoli, 17 May 2019.

⁴⁴ During his 16 May 2019 visit to Rome, Haftar demanded that Libyan state revenues now administered by the internationally recognised Central Bank in Tripoli be overseen by the Benghazi branch under his control. The Benghazi branch operates independently of Tripoli and has no access to oil revenues. Haftar has threatened that, should the Tripoli bank not take this step, his forces will shut down the oil terminals under his control. Crisis Group interview, Italian diplomat, 17 May 2019.

greater levels of destructiveness. This is why both sides, and their external backers, ought to more realistically assess the balance of power and the prospects it offers, and on that basis move away from their boastful rhetoric of imminent triumph. These regional actors, especially those on Haftar's side, also should have an interest in de-escalating tensions, lest they find themselves having to bankroll the LNA and the eastern government that supports it; both are set to run out of funds when a banking crisis that has been building since October 2018 reaches its climax in the very near future.

A prerequisite for a negotiated de-escalation is for both sides to feel that their basic interests have been adequately addressed. The Serraj government and the military forces aligned with it say they want the LNA's violent effort to unseat the GNA to end, the assault on Tripoli to stop, and guarantees that military power will remain under civilian oversight. The eastern government says it wants its fair share of oil revenues and to liberate the capital from what it considers militia rule before restarting negotiations over a political roadmap. Taken at face value, these objectives are not necessarily incompatible, and so a negotiated ceasefire that would allow the resumption of political, financial and military negotiations that achieves them should be possible.

International stakeholders ought to press the parties to accept a ceasefire reflecting a compromise between their respective positions: a withdrawal of Haftar's forces from Tripoli's immediate periphery but, at this stage, not (as Serraj demands) from other towns in the greater Tripoli area. They also should agree to steps to maximise the chances that both sides implement such a ceasefire: first, giving international legal backing through a UN resolution to an agreed ceasefire; secondly, endorsing and establishing an international monitoring mechanism, which could consist of unarmed monitoring personnel from EU member states with access to surveillance equipment and satellite imagery; thirdly, imposing sanctions on any eventual ceasefire violators; and fourthly, fully complying with the UN arms embargo on Libya, which is being openly flouted at present.

To pave the way for a political settlement, both parties will also need to allay their opponents' deepest fears and prejudices. On Haftar's side, this entails moving away from the belligerent rhetoric adopted so far and instead publicly recognising the GNA as a legitimate partner in UN-led negotiations to which it would have to commit. On Serraj's side, this means ensuring that the GNA-allied military factions accept a negotiation whose outcome could well spell the end of the Libyan Political Agreement, the 2015 power-sharing deal that gave rise (and UN backing) to the GNA. Any subsequent negotiations ought not to be strictly limited to Haftar and Serraj alone, but rather should include a broad array of stakeholders from across Libya's multiple institutional and military divides.

The U.S. in particular ought to recalibrate its approach toward the parties by reaffirming its support for the internationally recognised GNA and pressing both sides to accept an internationally monitored ceasefire such as outlined above and return to talks. Washington could also make a tangible difference by nudging the two sides toward an agreement on how to manage state finances and reunify economic institutions that have been split since 2014, such as the Central Bank. This last agreement

will not solve everything, but as described in a recent Crisis Group report, it is essential to avert another crisis and address some of Libya's post-2011 ills.⁴⁵

VI. Conclusion

Barring a sudden – and improbable – radical change in the balance of forces on the ground, the battle for Tripoli is likely to be long, destructive and deadly. For now, both the Tripoli government and its allies, on the one hand, and Haftar's forces, on the other, are embarked on a perilous path toward escalation that could well draw external actors deeper into the fight. The longer the fight for Tripoli continues, the greater the risk that it will ignite an all-out civil war, setting ablaze yet another country in an already deeply troubled region.

There is an alternative path, but it will require the two parties to compromise and – importantly – their respective international backers to stop fuelling the conflict and, instead, agree to work toward a ceasefire and empower the UN special envoy to restart political, financial and military negotiations.

Tripoli/Brussels, 23 May 2019

⁴⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Of Tanks and Banks: Stopping a Dangerous Escalation in Libya*, op. cit.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Germany Federal Foreign Office, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Charles Koch Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Korea Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, UniKorea Foundation, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

May 2019

Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Middle East and North Africa since 2016

Special Reports and Briefings

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Israel/Palestine

How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Russia's Choice in Syria, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000", Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

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Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

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How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

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Making the Best of France's Libya Summit, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

Restoring Public Confidence in Tunisia's Political System, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°62, 2 August 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

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On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).



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