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Can Libya be saved from partition?

Ishaan Tharoor

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The civil war in Libya is entering a potentially decisive new phase. A 14-month offensive led by renegade warlord Khalifa Hifter against the U.N.-recognized government in Tripoli, the Libyan capital in the country's west, is in full-fledged retreat. Backed by Turkish firepower, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) reversed Hifter's gains, seized strategic bases controlled by his forces and is in the midst of an eastward operation on the coastal city of Sirte. It was near Sirte in 2011 where the Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi was cornered and killed by Western-backed rebel forces. The years since Gadhafi's overthrow have proved mostly calamitous for the oil-rich North African nation, with a mess of factions and tribes squabbling over political fiefdoms and control of its lucrative oil assets. Fragile governments have struggled for legitimacy outside the cities where they're based, while Islamists and human traffickers have proliferated along the Mediterranean coast. The conflicts have displaced tens of thousands of Libyans. Thousands have died.

The battles between the GNA and Hifter's Libyan National Army (LNA) have morphed into a proxy war: The former, though internationally recognized, is supported primarily by Turkey and Qatar; the latter, ensconced in Libya's east, has been backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia and even France. Each country has different reasons for engaging in the conflict. None of them are capable of ending it on their own.

Hifter, though, appears to be in trouble. Last week, the LNA lost its last western stronghold in Tarhuna, some 40 miles southeast of Tripoli. It marked a dramatic reversal of fortune for Hifter, who had at one point encircled Tripoli with his forces, which included detachments of Russian and Sudanese mercenaries.

"The fall of Tarhuna spells the end of Hifter's offensive on Tripoli," Wolfram Lacher, a Libya expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, told my Washington Post colleague Sudarsan Raghavan. "He now no longer has a realistic chance to seize power. This will have major ripple effects on his alliance, which was based on the idea that he would sweep to power. Now that his forces have been routed, many in his alliance will reconsider their loyalties."

Over the weekend, a chastened Hifter appeared in Cairo, accompanied by Egyptian President Abdel-Fatah el-Sissi, and announced his unilateral commitment to a cease-fire. Just days earlier,

Hifter's chief adversary, Prime Minister Fayez Serraj, appeared in Ankara alongside Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and vowed to "eliminate the enemy."

"All of our bearing points are changing," Tarek Megerisi, an analyst with the European Council on Foreign Relations, told the New York Times. "It's very unclear what things will look like once the dust settles. But this is Hifter on the ropes."

Both Turkey and Russia have stressed their commitment to a political solution to the conflict. But after multiple rounds of failed negotiations, a peaceful fix still seems remote. "With Hifter's own circles now calling for a halt to violence, a diplomatic solution may be back on the table," wrote Emiliano Alessandri of the Middle East Institute. "But as the GNA's Sirte offensive shows, the confrontation is hardly over and meaningful talks will only start when military gains have been exhausted."

For the regional players involved, Libya is terrain to exercise their agendas. The rivalries of Gulf monarchies have played out violently among feuding Libyan militias, while Moscow and Ankara's deployments have rendered Europe a largely toothless bystander. Turkish officials invoke Ottoman ties to Tripoli to justify their deep involvement, but the major geopolitical dividend for Turkey has been an agreement with Serraj's government over rights to explore and drill for oil in the eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, "Russia is playing a double game," wrote my Post colleague Robyn Dixon, "encouraging diplomacy to try to establish a cease-fire and power-sharing deal, while sending in planes and mercenaries to shore up Hifter in the oil-rich east. The planes and mercenaries are designed to cement Hifter's military position and strengthen his bargaining power in negotiations."

Hifter, who lived for many years in the United States, is a polarizing figure, celebrated by some in the Arab world - and reportedly once in a private phone call with President Donald Trump - as a tough strongman who gives no quarter to Islamists. But analysts point to Salafists and other Islamist factions existing on both sides of the battlefield. And Hifter, whose opportunism has led him to allegedly pursue illicit oil deals as far afield as Venezuela, may be falling out of favor with the governments that once propped him up.

Even then, the GNA won't be capable of reclaiming the entirety of the country by force of arms. "There's still a strong impression that many of these actors see the conflict in Libya as a zero-sum game and are not really ready to make any kind of compromise," Virginie Collombier of the European University Institute in Florence said Tuesday during a webinar.

Karim Mezran of the Atlantic Council warned during a webinar last month that without real international will to forge a meaningful peace, Libya's de facto "partition becomes a fact." That's not a pleasant scenario. "It is more likely to resemble the messy secession of Sudan's southern region, creating South Sudan," wrote Ted Galen Carpenter of the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. "Quarrels over control of Libya's oil production between independent eastern and western Libyan states may be enough by themselves to cause serious continuing tensions."

U.N. officials and international diplomats hope this won't come to pass. Mezran added that coercing Libya's warring parties into finding a political solution will take real "diplomatic power," including from the United States. But he argued that a distracted and somewhat indifferent Trump administration may not have the "capacity, willingness or political vision" to adequately address a near-decade-long crisis.