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## **Libya in Transition: Human Mobility, International Conflict and State Building**

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# Libya in Transition: Human Mobility, International Conflict, and State Building. Introduction

In July 2019, the situation in Libya has once more escalated into an all-out war fought inside the capital city of Tripoli. Since April 2019, a military offensive led by Khalifa Haftar has attempted to take over Tripoli and disband the supporters of the Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Haftar's initiative, however, got bogged down in the sands of Tripoli. Today's war is the latest chapter in a confrontation that began in the summer of 2014, following the second political election in post-Qaddafi's Libya and the split of central institutions between the western and eastern parts of the country. At stake in this confrontation between al-Sarraj and Haftar as well as their respective international allies are the futures of the capital city and the state's institutions. Although Europe formally supports the United Nations (UN) peace process and the GNA, European country members are divided on the ground. Rightly, much emphasis has been placed on French military involvement in support of Haftar, which was revealed as early as 2016 when a Paris helicopter was shot down in Cyrenaica and a number of French soldiers lost their lives. Fighting in Libya in support of Haftar are forces from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Sudan, while Vladimir Putin's projection into the Mediterranean region is indicative of Russia's status as another important ally. Italy is the main European supporter of al-

Sarraj's government and of its main stakeholder – the military and political leadership of Misrata. Italy's ground presence in Libya includes a military base near the city of Misrata that opened in 2016 as a field hospital for military personnel injured during the war against ISIS in Sirt. This base was subsequently included in January 2018 as part of the framework of Italy's Bilateral Mission of Assistance and Support in Libya. Together with Italy, Turkey and Qatar are very active military sponsors of al-Sarraj's government, while the United States has demonstrated a back-and-forth stance during the present crisis by alternatively supporting both Haftar and al-Sarraj.

The Libyan conflict is increasingly taking on a more international tenor, where Libyan players are closely dependent on their international allies but, at the same time, are also capable of diverting ally agendas to their own benefit. In order to obtain more support from his northern allies, al-Sarraj exploited Italian and general European fear of mass migration from the Libyan coast by announcing that over 800,000 people, including possible Libyan and foreign terrorists, were ready to take to the sea. In reality, there were over 80,000 internally displaced people as a consequence of military operations and an increasing influx of international migrants towards southern Tunisia (rather than Europe).<sup>1</sup> How the Libyan crisis is presented forms part of the problem as it can greatly influence both local and international agendas. The situation in Libya is definitely not one of 'chaos' as is written by some political analysts and press columnists, and this misconception may result from a failure to fully understand a situation that is, in actuality, quite intricate. Events reflect a confrontation between two primary directions for the future of Libya: the conservative and corporative plan pursued by Haftar and his international allies, and the Islamic vision of the Misrata leadership. The last two months of war in Tripoli have demonstrated the difficulty in finding a military solution as neither of the two fronts has been able to prevail over the other. Therefore, the Libyan conflict is in need of a political rather than a military solution, a solution that must consider primarily the needs of Libya rather than those of its international allies. This themed issue addresses the Libyan crisis in terms of its international and historical contexts. As Karim Mezran writes in his contribution, the fact that two elections were held and yet failed to bring stability deserves greater attention. Libyan elections did not resolve the situation but rather crystallized it, functioning as an incentive for the interference of various local and international actors. The fragmentation of Libyan society is an ongoing effect of the conflict as well, serving as a premise for the 2011 revolt against Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi's regime. Anna Baldinetti's account of Libyan national historiography since independence in 1951 highlights the power and weakness of the unified nation-state building project in Libya and argues how, in post-Qaddafi Libya, the writing of national history is becoming a very sensitive topic and contested terrain amongst different players in order to affirm their national stance. Today, fragmentation has also resulted from previous attempts to reform the al-Qaddafi regime and the mixed outcomes that followed. The processes of *infatih* (economic overture) in 1987 and

then in 1990 constituted a "subterfuge, comprising a selective economic liberalization that relieved some of the internal pressures in light of the hardships Libyan citizens had faced, combined with a curtailing of some of the revolution's excesses, without, however, affecting the basic power structure of the regime" (Vandewalle 2011: 217). In March 2003, the General People's Congress adopted legislation intended to launch the third *infatih* that was to be led by the appointed Prime Minister, Mr. Shukri Muhammad Ghanem. Privatization supposedly had to counterbalance the state sector's inability to meet the increasing job need of younger Libyans, whose rate of unemployment was above 30 percent. A reshuffling of the cabinet in March 2006 removed the reform-minded Prime Minister Ghanem, after he had asked for a constitution for the country. Thus, the primary limit of the reform process was that "the country's political structures were not subject to the same kind of liberation measures to match and facilitate the economic transition" (Vandewalle 2011: 231).

The Libyan uprising evidently substituted former political and economic elites, partisans of al-Qaddafi's regime, with new elites, by assuring the emergence on the political scene of new actors. However, a new and wider political participation of popular masses was challenged and finally prevented by military groups (Tabib 2014: 150). Violence mixes with fragmentation and competition among different territorialities that, as Ali Bansaâd discusses in his article, are incompatible with the existence of nation-states. Fragmentation could also represent an opportunity for the rise of minority communities. The case of the Amazigh community of Zwara and those communities in the Jabal al-Nafusa represents a 'laboratory of belonging', as Chiara Pagano argues in her piece, inextricably linking the credibility of Libya's democratic transition to the constitutional recognition of their linguistic and cultural specificity. In order to build a unitary linguistic and cultural community, ethnic categories were mobilized with the aim of obtaining political autonomy and control over local resources.

The economy in post-Qaddafi Libya is not only becoming entangled in warfare but is also closely affecting the migratory trends and dynamics of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in Libya. As Delphine Perrin points out in her article, migration was one of Qaddafi's key diplomatic instruments, and for Libyan stakeholders today it remains a bargaining chip to the degree that the law has been used greatly to orientate migrations in international relations. The migrants' point of view, with specific reference to those coming from the Horn of Africa, is presented by Valentina Fusari, who investigates in her paper the relationship between Horn migrants' stay in Libya since the early 1990s in order to understand if they perceive Libya as a hosting or transit country. Finally, Italian policy provides a good example for understanding how the issue of irregular migrants' control can become pivotal in bilateral relations and how it can be politically exploited from both sides in order to fulfill their particular agendas. In actuality, the migratory issue and the entire Italian policy in Libya are fostering the conflict rather than the peace process, as Antonio M. Morone discusses in his article. Italy and other

international powers definitely acted "not to induce social change or development but only to sustain local political powerbrokers and fuel local political competition" (Anderson 2017: 247).

Antonio M. Morone, editor of this issue

#### NOTES:

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