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The Libyan Dilemma

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Giving an interview to the Russian News Agency *Sputnik* on September 5, Supreme Commander-in-chief of Libyan armed forces General Khalifa Haftar criticized the anti-ISIS airstrikes launched by the US air forces in the area of the Libyan city of Sirte since August 1. Militia groups from Misrata aligned with Fayez Al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord began an offensive against the ISIS stronghold on May 12.

However, by today, the forces engaged in the Operation of "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous" have made little progress. So far, they have managed to regain only the outskirts of Sirte having failed to achieve a strategic upset. ISIS extremist armed groups conducting operations in the city quarters demonstrate profound mastery. They do not shy away from using snipers, car bombs and large-

scale road and building mining to reach their goals. Militants seem to have plenty of weapons and ammunition. The number of their forces is close to 6,000 people.

In the face of challenges, Fayeze Al-Sarraj appealed to the US requesting to support Misrata militia's ground operation with airstrikes. The fact that American, British and Italian military is participating in the offensive enraged General Haftar. He holds that Fayeze Al-Sarraj represents an illegitimate force, and that the US agreed to "render support" not out of pity for Al-Sarraj, but because it is pursuing its own interests in Libya.

And the General's claims are not ungrounded. De facto, today, the Tobruk-based government represents the only legitimately elected body in Libya. Its 106 members (out of 170) at the session on August 22, passed a no-confidence motion against Fayeze Al-Sarraj and called to form a new government (the right of the parliament to take this step was also confirmed by the corresponding resolutions of the UN Security Council). The question of who should be in charge of the armed forces remains one of the main stumbling stones. According to Article 8 of the Skhirat Agreement, signed on December 17, 2015, the Presidential Council was supposed to assume this duty. This provision is, however, contested by both the Tobruk-based government headed by Aguila Saleh Issa and General Khalifa Haftar.

What is noteworthy, Martin Kobler, Special Representative, Head of United Nations Support Mission in Libya, whose appointment was extended for another six months by the UN Security Council, fully supports Fayeze Al-Sarraj, while accusing General Haftar of sabotaging the resolution of the conflict. What's more, he is looking to secure his position by acquiring support of Moscow. In other words, he hopes that Moscow would pressure the Supreme Commander-in-chief into "joining the political deal on Libya." At the same time, Mr. Kobler is lobbying the lifting of the arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011, stressing, however, that it should be done only for the sake of the "forces controlled by Al-Sarraj." Ultimately, he advocates the lifting of embargo to support the groups from Misrata fighting ISIS militants. At the same time, however, he refuses to acknowledge the fact that Libya has already a regular army headed by General Haftar, and makes claims that the only force that fights for Libya's liberation is the militiamen. When explaining his position, Mr. Kobler says that only those, who "do not use weapons against anybody else, but terrorists" deserve to receive them. This statement forms a rather barefaced hint at General Haftar, who has expressed little confidence in the Islamist militia currently controlling both Tripoli and Misrata.

Apparently, Mr. Kobler's mission in Libya should be focused on the facilitation of formation of the Government of National Accord and not on the delivery of ultimatums to one of the parties.

However, General Haftar and the Tobruk-based parliament supporting him might find Mr. Kobler's current actions quite suspicious. For example, in his July 13 interview to the Associated Press, the UN Special Representative stated that there exists a possibility that the Libyan army could be decentralized, and that three military committees representing Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan might be established in place of it. Any experienced observer would sense that this statement ultimately implies a de facto disintegration of the country. What "national concord" could be expected in a country with a split army led by three commanders? The statement

betrays Mr. Kobler's desire to weaken General Haftar's position and leave him no chance to claim the status of the country's leader.

Mr. Kobler, however, represents just the tip of an iceberg. The fact that western powers are backing him manifested itself when after the above-mentioned August 22 vote in Tobruk, the governments of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Great Britain and the US called on the Tobruk-based Libyan parliament to vote on the new Government of National Concord within 10 days, as prescribed by the political agreement. And what is it if not a rough pressuring of people's nominees and bringing grist to Fayed Al-Sarraj's and Martin Kobler's mill?

The fact that the western mass media provides no coverage of operations carried out by western special forces in Libya is also telling that there is a shady situation. Newspapers and magazines seem to report on every topic in the world, but not on the situation in Libya. Airstrikes carried out by the US air forces in the territory of a sovereign state at the request of the self-proclaimed (this fact was also admitted by Mr. Kobler) government in Tripoli are discussed as something ordinary and inevitable. The only information about Libya comes in a form of muffled messages hinting at a "soon-to-be-launched" large-scale anti-ISIS ground operation. *The Newsweek* magazine mentioned in passing that President Obama's "smart Libyan policy" turned out to be not so smart after all. But, as this esteemed western periodical puts it, there is no choice, but to go on fighting terrorism and searching for solutions to the problem of illegal Libyan immigrants in Europe. Another interesting point: the US conducts its actions in Libya without an approval of the Congress or public support. And what can the international community expect from a country that disobeys its own laws!

Hastiness, inability to consider the specifics of the Libyan political process, outright disregard or formal observance of the international laws demonstrate that western countries pursue some global geopolitical and economic interests. Just recall that Libya is among the countries with the largest reserves of oil and minerals. Thus, control over its oil resources in the times when the west is going through a deep economic crisis might serve as a "gulp of oxygen" for the "laboring for breath" western economy. What is more, those acquiring control of the Libyan resources simultaneously receive a "lever of pressure" able to challenge Russia's position in the European oil market. And it is quite clear why the west does not need united sovereign Libya. It would be much more profitable to seize it under the pretext of anti-ISIS struggle, break up into three cantons and place the country's oil fields under the alleged protection of private military companies, which will act as brokers of transnational corporations that will acquire interest in Libyan oil fields back in the times of Muammar Gaddafi. And hypocritical slogans calling for the unification of the country simply mask the support of the forces dancing to the western tune on the ruins of their own country.

In these circumstances, appeals of the Russian diplomacy for the Libyan political forces to overcome internal disagreements for the sake of the country's population sound fair and reasonable. Ultimately, this is the only path to a healthy political process launched but suspended in Skhirat, which aims at the establishment of statewide public institutions, single police and armed forces, envisages the re-establishment of Libya's security, empowering the country to continue its counter-terrorist struggle.

