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Libya: two armies and two partners.

Explaining the dynamics of military co-operation between Tripoli and Tobruk with the US and Russia



In the context of a long lull in Libya, when the parties have given up direct fighting and toughened political rhetoric, the first steps towards the restoration or rather the creation of some semblance of national institutions are being observed. The Armed Forces have not been spared from such processes. It is in this logic that the recent visits of Lieutenant General Mohammed Al-Haddad, Chief of General Staff of the Western Libyan forces, to the United States and Russia should be understood – events that are not insignificant from a military and political perspective, but hardly fit into the discourse about the potential support of one or another world centre of power.

More than 80 military delegations from around the world visited Russia during the recently concluded Army-2024 international military-technical forum held at the Patriot Exhibition and Convention Centre from 12-14 August 2024, ensuring widespread interest in the event, albeit overshadowed by tensions along the Russian-Ukrainian border in the Kursk region. Largely reflecting Moscow's deliberate policy of rapprochement with the states of the African continent, the forum was attended by a number of representatives from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, including Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Mali and others. And while it is too early to talk about major successes as well as disappointments related to the outcome of the forum, it is already possible to consider one of the most unique cases of participation: the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Western Libya, a territory controlled by the Government of National Unity (GNU), arrived in Russia shortly after his trip to New York, where, at the invitation of the American side, Lieutenant General Mohammed Al-Haddad attended a conference organised by the African Command of the US Armed Forces. Thus, one of the most senior Libyan military officers, in a short period of just over a month, managed to attend significant events in two antagonistic centres of power, which inevitably prompts us to understand the purpose and reasons for such a multi-vector approach.

Libya's armed forces: from infighting to timid rapprochement?

Let us first turn to the internal structure of the Libyan Armed Forces (AF) as it stands today. Since the fall of the Libyan Jamahiriya regime led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the country has been plunged into a regularly renewed civil war. Despite the more or less final conclusion of the latter as a result of negotiations in Geneva from 1 to 5 February 2021, there is no talk of overcoming the division between East and West, as well as various non-regional political forces and interest groups. Both the Tripoli-based GNU and the House of Representatives (HoR), the parliament elected in 2014 and based in Tobruk, have their own armed forces, as the parties to the long-running confrontation are supposed to do. However, while the GNU refers to various factions of Western Libyan cities formally subordinated to the Minister of War and the Chief of General Staff, the HoR relies on the Libyan National Army (LNA), a fairly coherent structure, created and controlled by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar (including through the involvement of his closest relatives), i.e. remaining fully loyal to the HoP only if the alliance between Haftar and Aguila Saleh, the permanent head of the legislature, remains intact.

With the end of the open conflict between Tobruk and Tripoli in late 2020 and early 2021, the key issue on the agenda for both the West and the East has become the establishment

of the institutional framework necessary to forge a unified political, economic and military environment. For example, a joint 5+5 commission was set up to coordinate the fight against terrorism and overcome any possible contradictions. In addition, bilateral contacts are maintained by the Chiefs of Staff of the West and the East – the already mentioned Lieutenant General Al-Haddad and Lieutenant General Abdel Razek Al-Nadri of the LNA. At the same time, careful attempts to consolidate existing contacts are recorded in parallel with the bellicose statements and actions periodically carried out by GNU and HoR supporters. Overall, such dynamics are indicative of a growing consensus among the Libyan military, which nevertheless continues to exist within a visible West-East divide.

External co-operation vector

Admittedly, understanding the current goals and approaches characteristic of the different factions of the Libyan military remains extremely difficult. On the one hand, joint visits abroad by representatives of rival centres of power may indicate an attempt to form an all-Libyan negotiating position. On the other hand, both the West and the East of Libya are interested in establishing contacts with all major players active in the region, be it Russia, the US, Turkey, Egypt or China, which means that giving opponents an opportunity to establish closer contact with one of these actors would be an imprudent move. Paradoxically, in contrast to the behaviours typical of political heavyweights in divided nations, none of the major political forces in Libya are seeking external patrons at the expense of possible relations with other powers. For example, both the GNU and the LNA maintain close contacts with the US and, in particular, the Pentagon, as well as Russia. As a result, any attempt to attribute Khalifa Haftar, Aguila Saleh, Abdel Hamid Dbeiba or Saif Al-Islam Qadhafi – the most influential politicians of modern Libya – as supporters or allies of Moscow or Washington should be regarded as a significant simplification of reality.

Thus, Lieutenant General Mohammed Al-Haddad's trips abroad, even taking into account such atypical geography of routes, should not be interpreted within the framework of conspiracy approaches. In practice, the visits of one of the leaders of the Armed Forces of Western Libya to the United States and Russia once again confirm the readiness of Libyan political forces to communicate and co-operate with both Moscow and Washington. It seems logical that such a state of affairs is conditioned both by the internal demand for a way out of the perennial crisis and by the existing balance of power between Tripoli and Tobruk, as well as by the peculiarities of the geopolitical context.

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