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COMMENTARY

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Libya's New Military Politics: Back to the Future?

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The military campaign launched on 16 May by Libya's former chief-of-staff Gen. Khalifa Haftar to oust the Islamist factions that dominate the country's parliament has been likened to the removal by Egyptian Armed Forces commander and defence minister General Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi of President Mohammad Morsi and the governing Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in July 2013. Haftar has similarly accused the Libyan Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party and the even more conservative Loyalty to the Martyrs Islamist parliamentary bloc of "fostering terrorism," and called on the judiciary to form an emergency government and oversee new parliamentary elections. A chief ally, military police chief Col. Mukhtar Farnana, also echoed Egypt's Sisi by insisting that their movement was a response to "the people's choice," not a coup d'état.

But these similarities are superficial, and end there. Rather, what has driven Libya's transition to breaking point is its complex military politics, centred on the struggle to determine the nature and control of the country's badly fragmented armed forces. This continues to unfold against a backdrop of the governing authorities' failure to disarm and integrate the country's many powerful revolutionary militias, generate jobs, and provide non-militarized security and law enforcement.

Haftar's movement draws on familiar grievances and officer networks, and does not fundamentally change the military political patterns and relationships that have blocked Libya's transition to date. In the immediate term, it greatly increases the risk of civil war. In the longer term, ideally, it could force the country's fractious political parties and powerful autonomous

militias onto the path towards eventual integration into a single national army. But failure, which remains more likely, takes Libya back to the destabilizing tensions and rivalries of the 1950s and 1960s that led to Col. Muammar Qaddafi's coup.

Libyan military politics were largely suspended during the last twenty years of Qaddafi's rule, after all serious rivals had been eliminated or neutralized. The armed forces were marginalized politically and weakened operationally, and overshadowed by a range of security agencies and new regime maintenance forces. But his downfall unleashed new dynamics that have evolved constantly since then. Divisions and alignments among various military actors and their civilian counterparts in the transitional governing structures and newly-established political parties formed along familiar regional, tribal, and institutional lines, but also cut across them in novel ways.

The movement of Qaddafi-era officers reveals this clearly. Haftar and many of his core supporters are from Benghazi or other eastern towns, which explains why the Special Forces and Air Force have declared for him, while Farnana claims to represent the Nafusa-Zintan militia-based "Western Regional Military Council." Together they organized the series of "extraordinary conferences of the Libyan army" that resulted in the formation of the Assembly of Free Libyan Officers in April 2013, and most recently announced the establishment of a Supreme Military Council to rival the general staff headquartered in Tripoli.

Opponents accuse Haftar and his associates of seeking to restore the ancient regime, and certainly his alliance has drawn heavily on Qaddafi-era military rank-and-file. But resentment at their wholesale marginalization cuts across the pro- and anti-Qaddafi camps, since both are targeted by the Political Isolation Law of November 2013, which bans members of the former regime from holding public office for ten years. They additionally have a common cause in their wish to end the relentless assassinations of senior army and intelligence officers, and other leading officials. This also brought former deputy chief-of-staff Salem al-Jnaidi, who resigned his post in November 2013 to protest the continued power of revolutionary militias, and defence minister Abdullah al-Thinni, currently the acting prime minister, into the same camp. The fact that Jnaidi and Thinni come from Libya's western border region underlines the cross-regional nature of the officer alliance.

A second camp is also based in official state institutions, but has adopted "hybrid" security structures since 2011. Among its leading figures are Major-General Youssef al-Mangoush, who was interim deputy defence minister until being appointed chief-of-staff in January 2012, and his successor Major-General Abdul-Salam Jadallah al-Obeidi, who assumed the position in August 2013. Lacking a strong institutional base in the army, they have been compelled to work with the Libya Shield Forces, a new structure promoted by the powerful militias of Misrata in the west to

integrate the revolutionary groups that sprang up during and after the 2011 uprising against Qaddafi. This, too, caused the deep chagrin of many in the regular armed forces.

The emerging military politics clearly revolve in part around formal posts such as that of the chief of staff, who acts as one of several interfaces between various armed groups on the ground, the ministry of defence, and the General National Congress. The same dynamic also applies to the third camp that has formed since 2011, centring institutionally on the ministry of defence, but also comprising various militias. Qaddafi abolished the ministry in 1991, but since its resurrection in 2011 it has largely been controlled by Zintanis and their affiliate militias, while the post of deputy minister has been held by Sadeq Mabrouk and Khaled al-Sharif, both former leading members of the militant Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG, founded in 1995).

Using this vantage point, Mabrouk and Sharif have drawn on allied revolutionary militias to form and control new official units such as the border guard and national guard. GNC President Nouri Abu Sahmain is also aligned with this camp, and in July 2013 endorsed the Libyan Revolutionaries' Operation Room that grouped Islamist and allied militias from Misrata to counter rival political blocs in Tripoli. Predictably, Abu Sahmain ordered the arrest of Haftar days after the start of his movement in May 2014, disregarding the Thinni government's peace initiative of May 19.

None of these alignments and patterns are fixed. Abu Sahmain comes from Libya's Amazigh minority, for example, whereas fellow Amazigh Usama al-Juweili placed several Zintani revolutionary battalions onto the defence ministry payroll during his tenure as minister in 2011-2012. Similarly, while the newly established Petroleum Facilities Guard was also formed of former revolutionaries under the command of the defence ministry, its western and south-western branches are dominated by Zintani militias and in late 2013 its eastern branch joined a rebellion led by federalists who have since rallied to Haftar.

As in 2011, the Libyan armed forces may again be splitting and fragmenting, and their ability to decide the balance of political power is far from certain. But the weaknesses and disunity of the country's civilian governing bodies suggests that resolution of divisive debates about the distribution of power and wealth will be driven by military politics, much as in the transition from the monarchic era to the republic in 1969. These remain very much in flux, and have been greatly complicated by the addition of powerful revolutionary militias to the mix. But much as military politics ushered in the transition from Cyrenaican-dominated monarchy to republic in 1969, they may now be the means to break Libya's political deadlock and end the damaging tribal and regional legacy of the Qaddafi era.

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