Confrontation in Libya

As more and more international actors are becoming involved in the war in Libya, the country itself is turning into a staging ground for an intense confrontation among various regional and global players. Brussels, for the most part, has taken responsibility for the issues plaguing this nation, being torn apart by a bloody conflict, as refugees streaming into Italy, Greece, France and Spain have become a serious problem for Europe. However, the United States managed to avoid any involvement in Libya until the very last minute by adopting a wait-and-see approach. In order to resolve the crisis, Rome, Paris and Berlin, with assistance from Moscow, have made several attempts to get the local players involved in the Libyan conflict to the negotiating table. However, neither Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who governs the eastern part of the country, nor head of the Government of National Accord of Libya (GNA) Fayez al-Sarraj was willing to reach a compromise, and the entire talks on Libya have broken down on several occasions. Washington continued to ignore this problematic situation.

Ghassan Salamé, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Libya, has expressed his concern not only about the differences in opinion between the opposing sides in the Libyan conflict, but also about the role external forces play in this nation. During the Rome MED (Mediterranean Dialogues) Conference, he stated that from the very start of the war in Libya, the level of involvement by international actors in the crisis had increased in many different ways, including deliveries of weapons to the country; presence of foreign ground troops, and, in general, provision of external military and technical assistance. He also added this could not go on forever.

We would like to remind our readers that the situation in Libya has been unstable since 2011, when U.S.-supported insurgents toppled the nation’s leader Muammar al-Gaddafi. In 2012, militants used grenade launchers to attack the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi. The building caught on fire and U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens died as a result. The tragedy shocked Washington and altered their view about the Arab Spring. Subsequently, the U.S. leadership continued to verbally support the changes taking place in Libya. But in reality, they distanced themselves from the situation in this nation.

At the beginning of April 2014, Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), announced the start of an anti-terrorist operation aimed at freeing Tripoli from militants. Currently, the so called Government of National Accord is based in the capital of Libya. This structure is controlled by Western forces, and closely tied with terrorist groups (banned in the Russian Federation), including Daesh, Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and a number of others.

Once the Arab Spring put an end to the “Jamahiriya” system of government in Libya, the United States distanced itself from the developments there. However, recently, Washington has suddenly refocused its attention on this nation and began to accuse Russia of stoking the armed conflict in Libya. Not too long ago, U.S. Army General Stephen J. Townsend, the commander of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), expressed his concern about the growing role of Russia in Libya. He talked about the supposed presence of Russian mercenaries in this country, and military and technical assistance provided to the Libyan National Army, headed by Khalifa Haftar, by the Russian Federation.

According to the General, it was a Russian anti-aircraft system that had shot down an American drone in the sky over Libya on 21 November. However, there is no evidence that a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was destroyed, with the exception of unsubstantiated statements made in social media about the incident and verbal attacks directed against Russia. Moreover, there is every reason to doubt that this American drone even existed. For
instance, when an Italian UAV (produced by the United States) was shot down in Libya a month earlier, literally a few hours afterwards, a message and a photograph of its remains appeared in the M.LNA Twitter feed. But there has been no information of this nature about the American drone that had been supposedly destroyed in November.

As for the disinformation campaign artificially spread by Washington and its allies about the purported presence of members of Russia’s Wagner Group in Libya, once again there is absolutely no evidence that this is actually the case. During his speech at the 5th Rome MED Conference, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov responded in the following manner when asked to comment on the aforementioned issue: “As to the rumors spread by our US colleagues, for some reason no questions are asked when NATO countries’ servicemen, who had never been invited, officially appear all over the world (if we speak about the Mediterranean, take Syria, for instance)”. In response to Washington’s accusations that the Russian Federation preferentially supports only the Libyan National Army (LNA, headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar), Moscow has repeatedly pointed out that it is cooperating with all sides of the Libyan conflict, i.e. not only the head of the LNA but also Tripoli, and that it is in favor of resolving the current conflict via negotiations. For instance, GNA head Fayez al-Sarraj took part in the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, in October of this year. The Russian Foreign Minister was reassuring when commenting on statements saying that some in the West felt fearful of Russia’s involvement in Libya on the side of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. He said that Russia’s policy in Libya had no geopolitical dimension and put the interests of Libyan people first. The official also added that the Russian Federation did not take sides in the conflict.

Since, currently, the Libyan National Army is engaged in a decisive anti-terrorist operation in Tripoli, it is in U.S. interests to sabotage it. By interfering in Libya’s affairs, Washington has been able to control the price of oil in its own interests and those of its “dependent” nations in the Middle East but not in favor of Russia or member-states of OPEC. Lack of stability in Libya is beneficial for the United States. As there is no central government in the nation, Washington can, at any moment, cause a rise or fall in tensions there. In addition, the continued unrest in the African country allows the USA to control flows of refugees and use them as a means of pressuring the European Union.

Recently, Turkey has started to support the U.S. efforts in Libya more actively. During a meeting with students of Bilkent University in Ankara, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan talked about his willingness to offer military aid to GNA fighters in Libya. The Turkish President is essentially using the rumors about the Wagner Group to justify the deployment of Turkish forces to Libya, thus adding legitimacy to the military support and cooperation offered to the GNA militants in Tripoli in contravention of an arms embargo imposed in the nation.

In addition, Turkey and the Government of National Accord signed an agreement on the demarcation of the maritime borders in the eastern Mediterranean, thus turning plans of many other nations in the region upside down. These initiatives involved the energy resources in this part of the world and the aforementioned move angered Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel and the Persian Gulf.

We would like to remind our readers that the eastern Mediterranean was put on the global agenda in 2010 when information about its hydrocarbon deposits became public knowledge. However, political upheavals in Egypt, and Khalifa Haftar’s efforts to expand the territories under his control during Libya’s civil war did cripple Turkey’s plans at the time. Hence, by signing the aforementioned agreement, Ankara made the first step in an attempt to restore the regional balance of power in its favor. Egyptians have already referred to the deal between Turkey and Libya's GNA as illegal, and Athens described the accord as geographically absurd. The Greek government declared the Libyan Ambassador in Athens, Mohamed Younis A.B. Menfi, a persona non-grata. The Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent letters to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the UN Security Council requesting that the agreement on maritime borders between Turkey and Libya not be recognized as it violates international legislation. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis also intends to get the European Union (EU) on his side in its efforts to fight the accord. The EU has expressed concern about this document because worsening relations between Greece and Turkey will obviously have a negative effect on maritime trade in this region as well as extraction of natural gas. Still, Europe intends to exercise “extreme caution” in this delicate matter since Turkey plays an important role in politics of the region especially in the context of seemingly unstoppable flows of refugees into Europe.

NATO also plans to treat this conflict with “great care” despite the fact that both Turkey and Greece are members of this military alliance.

At the beginning of 2020, European mediators are going to make yet another attempt to help reconcile the warring
sides in the Libyan conflict. The Berlin conference on Libya is scheduled for 2020, and the leaders of the opposing groups have already tentatively agreed to take part in the forum. However, it is still too early to talk about any possible breakthroughs in the talks.

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