Since the military intervention in Libya by an international coalition (primarily comprised of NATO member states, led by Washington) began in 2011, it has been impossible to establish a stable centralized government in the country. The nation ended up being divided between the Government of National Accord (GNA, an opponent to military forces), headed by Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar. The fighting in Libya has not even stopped amid the Coronavirus pandemic, which is spreading throughout the nation just as in other parts of the world.

In addition, tensions in Libya rose yet again at the end of May. GNA troops ousted Khalifa Haftar’s forces from strategically important positions on the outskirts of the capital and took over the international airport and other areas south of Tripoli, as they continued to push Libyan National Army further south.

The Field Marshal began the offensive to retake the Libyan capital as far back as April 2019. He explained that the attack was warranted in the interests of security, since the presence of a substantial number of extremist and terrorist units in the city was among the key reasons why the nation-wide conflict has not been resolved thus far. He has been trying to capture Tripoli since April. However, he has been unable to seize the city and his forces have remained on the outskirts.

At present, GNA forces are pushing onwards, further south. They have already recaptured the town of Asbi’ah (Alasaba) and are now targeting Tarhuna, where Haftar’s main base of operations is located. Tarhuna is the only sizable town in the environs of Tripoli (it is 80 km south of the capital) that remains in LNA’s hands. If the GNA succeeds, the loosely knit provinces in the western part of the Tripolitania region may end up under the control of Fayez al-Sarraj-led government. GNA forces will then be able to not only begin their offensive in more distant areas, adjoining LNA territories, but to also play a more decisive role in the conflict, thus emerging victorious in the end.

However, even though almost the entire Tripolitania region, bordering Tunisia, is currently under GNA’s control, it is still too early to talk about the Field Marshal’s complete defeat. It is important to remember that Khalifa Haftar’s army is one of the most combat-ready military forces in Libya at present. And if the LNA truly had all the resources necessary for an armed confrontation, the Libyan capital would have been captured by it a long time ago. Hence, Fayez al-Sarraj’s current victory could, in a matter of days, turn into a devastating defeat.

It is essential to acknowledge that, nowadays, the way the situation in Libya will continue to develop and the possibility of reaching a peace agreement, in large part, all depend on the actions and positions that will be taken by external actors behind not only Fayez al-Sarraj but also Khalifa Haftar.

For instance, recently, Ankara has started supporting Fayez al-Sarraj’s GNA more actively, after Turkey and the Government of National Accord signed an agreement on security and military cooperation in December 2019. According to the Al Hadath news outlet, although the UN arms embargo on Libya remained in place, Turkey continued to supply the GNA with weapons, ammunition and heavy armored vehicles, transported by Turkish ships via Libya’s Misurata Port. Ankara has already sent 1,500 Turkish servicemen to assist the GNA, and 2,500 military personnel are to join them soon. In addition, Turkey has been sending fighters from the Syrian opposition forces to Libya since the end of the previous year.

The European Union and NATO, just as Turkey, only recognize Fayez al-Sarraj’s government. However, they are in no hurry to support it militarily and continue to pay lip service to the arms embargo.
In such conditions, further escalation of the armed conflict in Libya can only be avoided by holding peace talks between the rivals, the GNA and LNA.

Russia and Turkey have once again taken the initiative and begun seeking ways of resolving the crisis in Libya, which has already lasted for almost 10 years, by peaceful means. The nations’ Presidents, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, prefer to discuss Libya and its issues one-on-one and exchange telephone calls on a regular basis. It is also worth reminding our readers that, in January 2020, the Prime Minister of GNA, Fayez al-Sarraj, and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar came to Moscow, as part of Russia’s and Turkey’s ongoing joint efforts to establish a lasting ceasefire in Libya. However, Khalifa Haftar, encouraged by his military successes at the time, chose not to sign the agreement and left the Russian capital.

Turkey then found itself in the unenviable position of having to make a hard choice. Ankara’s allies in Tripoli made it clear that they would not agree to negotiations with the Field Marshal under any circumstances. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Turkish journalist Semih İdiz has said Libya’s vast territory meant that Turkey would be unlikely “to pursue a military strategy” there unless Khalifa Haftar’s support base broke up. In addition, the columnist thinks that if the Field Marshal continues to play an important “role in eastern Libya, then Turkey’s intervention will have gone in vain”. It is also essential to remember that Ankara’s primary motivation for getting involved in the conflict was a fairly controversial (from a legal standpoint) agreement on maritime border demarcation that it signed with the GNA. The deal allows Turkey to expand its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the resource-rich eastern Mediterranean region. Within its EEZ, Turkey has “exclusive rights to exploit natural resources, including mineral wealth,” Al Jazeera reported.

Hence, finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict is especially topical for Ankara nowadays.

During a telephone conversation at the end of May, immediately after GNA’s convincing victory in western Libya, ministers of foreign affairs of Russia and Turkey urged the warring sides to seize fighting and return to the negotiating table. A number of experts think that the move signaled the start of renewed efforts by Ankara and Moscow to resolve the conflict.

On June 2, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) announced that the GNA and LNA agreed to resume dialogue within the framework of the Libyan 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks, which had concluded on February 23.

Khalifa Haftar, who has categorically refused to engage in direct negotiations with Fayez al-Sarraj, travelled to neighboring Egypt in order to take part in discussions with political and military leadership of the largest Arab nation, which has, in the past month, considerably strengthened its defense capabilities owing to the recently signed agreements on military cooperation with a number of countries, including Italy and the United States. On June 3, media outlet Sky News Arabia reported that Spokesman for the Libyan National Army Ahmed Al-Mismari said no political negotiations would “advance unless Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan” withdrew his forces from Libya. “The Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, Fayez Al-Sarraj, made the crisis hostage to international conflicts,” he stated. The spokesman also pointed out that the LNA, which was fighting a war against militias and terrorists, was “putting the ball in the court of the international community to implement its obligations”.

Having sent his representatives to Moscow earlier, Fayez al-Sarraj travelled to Ankara on June 4. Vice President of Libya’s Presidential Council (PC) Ahmed Maiteeq, who had arrived in Moscow for talks earlier, said that the government in Tripoli was convinced that Russia was “a very important partner for establishing stability in Libya”. “In the coming period, in the coming days, we will see a sharp decrease in military escalation thanks to Russian diplomacy, which will work together with us to reduce this escalation,” he also added. It is also worth reminding our readers that, at the end of May, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov met with Head of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh Issa, loyal to the LNA, to discuss political settlement to the crisis.

Undoubtedly, the key to resolving the Libyan conflict lies in the show of unity by the international community. However, for now, each party views the path towards peace differently and everyone involved has their own terms. And while external players continue to disagree on who (out of the two) they support to become the leader of the future united Libya, it will be hard to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict quickly.

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