

Briefing

Centralising power in Libya: Serraj versus GNA factions

13 September 2020

Libya's Fayez al-Serraj has always struggled to assert himself over the competing militias that fight under the banner of the internationally recognised Government of National Accord. Ministries have had to be appointed in the spirit of appeasement as opposed to meritocracy. Until Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, many of these militias exerted autonomy on different levels with some, such as those of Misrata, even pursuing their own foreign policy in allying with Washington to fight designated terrorist targets. Misrata's Fathi Bashagha has established his own ties with foreign powers, irking his rivals and even Serraj who sought last week to remove him and drive a wedge between the Misratan factions. Following the ceasefire, Serraj has embarked on a bid to centralise power hoping to lean on Turkey, Washington, or any other power willing to trust him as he seeks to assert himself on the Central Bank and on Misrata.

This briefing assesses dynamics behind Serraj's bid to centralise power.

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Before Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, the GNA amounted to an umbrella organisation for individual militias keen to preserve their autonomy that allowed them to pursue their own foreign policy. The US had allied with Misrata in 2016 against extremist elements while other factions enjoyed their own channels with foreign powers that allowed them to exert enough influence to be able to force themselves on the GNA as an institution and ensure their representation in what was in reality, an impotent government. The head of the GNA, Fayez al-Serraj, acknowledged this reality by choosing to form governments based on a quota in accordance with the power of individual militias. Misrata as one of the most important fighting forces secured the important positions including the ministry of interior and Deputy Prime Minister.

The result was that as Haftar advanced Westwards, the GNA could not call upon these militias to defend their territory. Each was more concerned with their own territories and preservation of their own leverage against the GNA.

When Haftar attacked Tripoli, the militias suddenly united and flocked to Tripoli in a bid to prevent the LNA from seizing the capital. The reasoning was not a sudden respect for the GNA, but a realisation that if Haftar succeeded, they would all be side-lined as he would emerge as the most powerful force with enough subsequent international recognition that it would only be a matter of time before he seized the remaining territories occupied by the competing militias.

The sudden unification of the militias meant that what began as a swift LNA advance began to stall, until Turkey's eventual intervention that upended the military dynamics and drove Haftar's forces back to Sirte, and even taking the vital military base in Al-Watiya in the process.

After a period of a noticeable lull in fighting as Russia and Egypt sought to shore up LNA defences to stem an eager GNA advance, and an increasingly cautious Turkey that became uncomfortable with risking its gains on a battle that, if lost, would risk losing them entirely, a ceasefire was eventually announced.

However, immediately following the announcement of a ceasefire, protests broke out in a number of cities in Libya, and in particular Tripoli. While it is important to highlight that a number of protests broke out in the East (in LNA territory), the focus of this briefing is on Tripoli and the GNA.

Serraj had hoped that in the midst of such protests, the government that had united together to repel Haftar would stand firm so as to preserve its newfound leverage in negotiations and capitalise on the containing of Haftar's power in the East by Russia and Egypt who are empowering Aguila Saleh at his expense.

However, Serraj's minister of interior Fathi Bashagha announced that the protests were legitimate with legitimate grievances, irking Serraj and his close advisors including his deputy Ahmad Maetig who viewed Bashagha's statements as indicative of wider ambitions.

Serraj subsequently announced a four-day state of emergency on grounds of containing corona, ordered an investigation into Bashagha's conduct, then reinstated Bashagha a week

later with conflicting narratives ranging from Serraj having secured guarantees from Bashagha that he will toe the line, to Serraj buckling and seeking to avoid a conflict with Misrata.

Irrespective of the reason behind Bashagha's reinstatement, the reality is that the relentless competition between GNA faction and their ability to posture against one another militarily means that the GNA as an institution remains very limited in its ability to assert itself on the negotiation table. The crux of the problem is that while some powers negotiate with Serraj, parallel negotiations are taking place with other GNA factions such as Misrata, and recently converted Zintan which helped turn the tide against Haftar after its defection. Serraj finds that he cannot secure the unconditional support of even Turkey which is keen to keep the Misratan factions on board as it pursues its naval base, while Washington and Europe pursue a replacement of the GNA through negotiations.

The problem for Serraj is compounded by the lack of popular support for the GNA with protestors insisting that the war has become one between political elites jostling for power at the expense of the wider population. Where Serraj has sought to win over the local population, he has found resistance from the Central Bank and the NOC which are not convinced he is going to last and therefore find themselves with significant room to ignore his concerns.

It is for these reasons that Serraj is becoming increasingly assertive with his authority, and seeking international support to rein in the GNA militias into an organised regular army despite suspicions from Turkey, Washington, and antagonism from Paris.

Email us: contact@intlinterest.com