

UPDATE : Field Marshall Haftar has had meetings with the Russian government , which is considering providing him weapons and possible recognition as Libya's future leader. To do this, Moscow would have to abandon its support of the UN arms embargo and the UN supported GNA government in Tripoli. In return Russia would be seeking influence on Haftar's government. Moscow is only doing in public what the West has been doing surreptitiously.

If the West wishes to prevent Libya becoming a potential "client state" of Russia, it needs to do three things.

- 1) end all military assistance to Haftar,
- 2) take military action against Haftar and return the oil ports to the control of the GNA,
- and 3) initiate legal steps to have Haftar brought before an International Tribunal for war crimes.

If Haftar were removed. Russia would have no significant supporter in Libya. The GNA as the sole government would not be any friend of Russia.

In 2011, the US and UN overthrew Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi to prevent a massacre of the population of Benghazi whom Qaddafi had labeled Islamic terrorists and vowed to destroy house by house. Today, serious consideration is being given in some quarters to endorse Khalifa Haftar as Libya's new strongman as he does what Qaddafi was prevented from doing unleashing a bloodbath in Benghazi. Called Operation Dignity, Haftar launched his war of extermination on the people of Benghazi in May 2014. It has lasted two years. Like Qaddafi whom he loyally served for two decades, Haftar claims his opponents in Benghazi are Islamic terrorists, writes Joseph Fallon.

This is part of his campaign of disinformation to secure (tacit or explicit) approval for his war crimes from Western governments and media fearful of Islamic terrorism. In an analysis in Mediterranean Affair, Haftar exploits this fear seeking to scare the neighboring countries by picturing apocalyptic scenarios in case of lack of support (ISIS will invade Europe), speaking like Gaddafi did some years ago (If I fall, a multitude of migrants will invade Italy). Every day, it appears more clear that more than an anti-Islamist war, it is effectively becoming a clean way to bring every opposition down.

So unlike Assad in Aleppo and Daesh (ISIS) in Mosul, Haftar operations in Benghazi receive coverage by much of the Western media that is far less critical. This emboldens Haftar to continue to target civilians, the sick and infirm, the elderly, and children.

One of Haftar's prominent supporters, and fellow former Qaddafi loyalist, Beleid Sheikhi, has claimed all the old women and children in the resisting areas of Benghazi are terrorists and all people opposing Haftar aged 14 and over must be executed.

According to Amnesty International, in Benghazi: "Hundreds of civilians, including 130 Libyan families and foreign nationals who have been besieged for months and trapped by the fighting, are at risk of starving to death. They are running out of food, and the food they have left is inedible. Water is contaminated, infants are without milk and the sick are running out of medication. Children look like skin and bones because of the lack of food and poor nutrition."

The UN Special Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have accused Haftar's forces of committing serious human rights abuses and violated international humanitarian law. An official for the International Criminal Court investigating the atrocities in Benghazi has gone so far as to compare Haftar's operations to the war crimes committed by Serb forces in Srebrenica, Bosnia in the 1990s. Haftar own spokesman Colonel Mohammad Hejazi, has accused the General, now Field Marshall, of war crimes, as well as corruption and prolonging Libya's war.

Two additional elements in Haftar's disinformation campaign is to assert: 1) he heads the Libyan National Army and 2) this Libyan National Army is the only viable force to defeat Islamic extremists operating in Libya.

As to the first claim, much of the Libyan National Army (LNA) exists only on

paper. And there is nothing national about it. It is a glorified militia, many of its members come from Haftar's al-Farjani tribe, which is just one among the more than 140 tribes and clans that constitute Libya.

New African Magazine reports "In reality, however, there is not much of a Libyan National Army. According to reports, Haftar has only a few thousand men under his direct control. The rest of the fighting forces aligned with the elected government are local militias organised along tribal and regional lines. Haftar's forces are unique in Libya, however, in that they include a small but functioning air force. Because of the large numbers of trained ex-Gathafi air force personnel who joined his cause, Haftar has almost complete air superiority over Libya. He has used this to launch air raids on Tripoli, Misrata and the western mountains, as well as in close air-support missions in Benghazi and Derna. In doing so, Haftar's forces have also caused large but unspecified numbers of civilian casualties.

Haftar's political power base [is] in eastern Libya. His allies in western Libya, however, are few. They mainly consist of the tribal militias of Zintan and Warshafana. The town of Zintan remains the only outpost of the Operation Dignity alliance in the west of the country, and support in Tripoli is not apparent. Frequent air raids on western cities have done little to endear him to residents there."

Corroborating this, Frederic Wehrey, senior associate on the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington states, "The LNA forces are quite diffuse and diverse. So [the French] are backing military forces that fall under the loose command of General Haftar, but I'm not sure they see him as someone that's really leading this fight or could play a role [in Libya's future]"

The second claim is as false as the first. Newsweek reports "While Haftar's forces have been involved in clearing ISIS from Derna - LNA airplanes conducted strikes against the militants - and resisting any potential growth of the group in Benghazi, such conflicts remain tangential to the real battle to dislodge the militant group from its main base in the North African state. The deeply-complicated state of affairs in Libya is highlighted by the fact that Haftar's forces are now, in fact, bombing those of an Islamist group known as the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council, which did much of the on-the-ground work in removing ISIS from control in Derna, eventually achieved in February."

Wehrey adds that Daesh's "ground zero" in Libya is in Sirte, and "he [Haftar] is not playing a role in that fight. He's been able to parlay what I think has been uneven military performance into political leverage," said Frederic Wehrey.

Regional support [Egypt and UAE] is a key factor."

Haftar has worked to undermine the U.N. sponsored Government of National Agreement [GNA] and insure Libya remains politically fragmented and at war because under the GNA he would lose his position of head of the Libyan Army. According to the BBC, "Haftar is reported to be unhappy with the line-up of the GNA, which has allocated the defence portfolio to another officer, Ibrahim al-Barghathi."

As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reported: "On January 28, [2016] more than a month after LPA [Libyan Political Agreement] was signed in Skhirat, the HoR, [House of Representatives, rival government based in Tobruk] under the control of [Haftar's] Dignity though theoretically representing all of Libya, at last decided to approve the agreement, but without clause 8. Clause 8, one of the final provisions of the agreement, transfers all military powers to the Presidency Council, who will then decide on new military appointments within 50 days. In essence, this means resetting the military leadership of the country - and more importantly, the position currently held by General Haftar as head of the armed forces. The exclusion of clause 8 puts the whole agreement at risk, as almost none of the other factions are ready to accept an agreement that leaves the general in his current position."

Haftar is able to exert such influence over the HoR because Tobruk is his

◆fiefdom◆. This is corroborated by the European Council on Foreign Relations which reported: ◆The link between Khalifa Haftar ◆ the head of the HoR-aligned armed forces ◆ and the Speaker of the Tobruk parliament, Aguila Saleh Issa, is very strong. Haftar rules from his headquarters in Marj (in eastern Libya) and has strong military control over both the al-Bayda government and the HoR in Tobruk."</p> <p>The BBC reports several attempts by the HoR to grant a vote of confidence to the GNA failed to attain the necessary quorum for the vote because Haftar ◆persuaded his supporters among the deputies to deprive the legislature of the necessary number of attendants.◆ All the while Haftar claims he will abide by the decision of the HoR, which he is preventing from taking place.</p> <p>According to one US State Department official, ◆Haftar is not interested in democracy◆I don◆t even think he◆s particularly interested in peace." Haftar not only refuses to support the UN sponsored Government of National Unity, ◆He continues to push for a military takeover of Tripoli."</p> <p>Haftar has seized Libya◆s strategic oil ports from the GNA in an attempt to deny the UN backed government the income from Libyan oil needed to keep it economically functioning. By not taking military action against Haftar for attacking the UN-backed GNA and restoring those oil ports to Tripoli, the West has as Mattia Toaldo, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, observed ◆only emboldened the renegade general to the detriment of attempts to unify the chaotic North African country."</p> <p>Haftar seeks to turn the Libyan crisis which he created into an international crisis by persuading Egypt, UAE and now Russia to help him in his war. Egypt and the UAE are now actively militarily engaged in support of the aspiring dictator against the UN backed GNA. The EU, UN and the US should immediately impose economic sanctions on both governments.</p> <p>But what of the actions by the West? As Mattia Toaldo adds, the West, after confirmation of French Special Forces assisting Haftar, and participating in the Battle of Benghazi, France apparently having learned nothing from the Battle of Algiers, and leaked tapes suggesting UK, US, France, and Italy are coordinating air strikes in support of Haftar ◆◆will have to explain why it◆s supporting the unity government with a lot of diplomatic effort, while its military forces are supporting the rival of that government."</p> <p>The statement by Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni, that Khalifa Haftar ◆must◆ have a role in the future of Libya, one shared by others in the EU, is wrong. Haftar has no more a role in the future of Libya, than Radovan Karadzic or Ratko Mladic had in the future of Bosnia.</p> <p><em>Joseph E. Fallon is a subject matter expert on the Middle East and Central Asia. He has taught at the U.S. War College, the U.S. Army Intelligence Center, and lectured at the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management and for the U.S. Defense Department's Cultural Knowledge Consortium</em> ◆ </p>