Position Paper

Taking a Gamble, Haftar Resorts to Force

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Abstract

Khalifa Haftar has used the internationally-recognised "war on terror" slogan to garner both domestic and foreign support for his use of force in Libya. In particular, he knows that fighting terrorism is a priority for the United States, the foreign country most affected by terrorism in Libya because its embassy there was attacked and its ambassador and other diplomats killed in September 2012. Looking at neighbouring Egypt, Haftar also observes that leadership there is citing the "war on terror" to justify its attacks on the opposition and suppress demands for democracy and freedom. However, both Islamists and non-Islamists have voiced reservations about his strategy, including senior military officers. These groups believe that escalating violence will only succeed in exacerbating the state of affairs. Furthermore, even those who support the use of force believe Haftar is unqualified to lead this process due to past mistakes which suggest he is not capable of imposing and maintaining security.

Introduction

Retired Major-General (1) Khalifa Haftar 's attack on Benghazi-based armed groups came in the context of a deteriorating security situation in the city. This deteriorating security situation has been manifested in the escalation of assassinations of prominent military and civilian figures, and almost daily killings of non-commissioned officers and soldiers during the past few months. There have also been several kidnappings for material gain and an increased number of bombings and clashes between members of the anti-terror commando forces and the Ansar Al-Shari'ah armed group. The government, particularly the Ministry of the Interior and its subordinate bodies, has demonstrated a complete inability to contain the situation, failing to take any action to respond to violence in the city.

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There have been no positive developments in the city's security system, even after the security team and the Directorate of Security were provided with equipment required to enhance the capabilities of their 10,000 security and police forces. Despite providing urgent support in the amount of 17 million Libyan dinars (about $14 million), (2) the pace of killings has increased significantly since the reinforcements were given.

The question remains whether Haftar will succeed in gambling on the discontent of Libyans with their government and external fears about militancy to gain domestic and international support for his military strategy. Furthermore, there is the question of whether or not the military solution will be successful in achieving what the political process has thus far failed to achieve.

Haftar 's move and Benghazi confrontations

Khalifa Haftar named his military strategy "Operation Dignity", with the stated aim of eradicating what he terms "terrorism" and of reclaiming Benghazi from those who he accuses of assassinations and bombings. Haftar 's manoeuvre was directed at areas where predominantly militant Islamist armed groups and some radicals are stationed. These included the February 17, Rav Allah Al-Shati, and Ansar Ash-Shari'ah brigades, in addition to the Malik Battalion led by Ziad Balam.

Using the excuse of counter-terrorism, Haftar moved rapidly to strike at the militants, believing the slogan would be sufficient to legitimise his use of force and his bid to control Benghazi. When the National Congress, the government and the chiefs of staff described his move as an attempt to overthrow the 17 February revolution, Haftar responded that these institutions had no legitimacy. He claimed to derive his legitimacy from the people who voted against extending the powers of the National Congress and the government in February 2014.

The slogan proclaimed by Haftar resonates with diverse military and civilian sectors, and extends to both the country's east and west. He is taking advantage of the state of anxiety, fear, frustration and anger that has spread among Libyans. The Congress and the government are facing rejection from various sections of the population, while armed groups are vague about their positions and their religious affiliations, especially the Ansar Ash-Shari'ah group which has not denied it was involved in assassinations. There is poor communication between political forces and civilian actors. Recent statements by Ansar Ash-Shari'ah have confirmed public concern about the group, something that will help promote Haftar 's campaign against it.

However, there are several contentions regarding Haftar 's military actions, and they are as follow:

- There is no concrete evidence that Haftar 's targets are involved in assassinations and bombings in Benghazi. Indiscriminate accusations against all these groups seem to be based on conjecture rather than evidence. In particular, accusations against the Malik battalion appear to be unfounded. The battalion became popular due to the significant positive role it played in containing the volatile situation in some southern cities. Conjecture cannot be the basis for such serious decisions as the one taken by Haftar and could potentially embroil the city in a war, with far more victims than those targeted in assassinations.

- The attack and the decision to engage in warfare was not preceded by exhaustive peaceful efforts to counter the planned assassinations and bombings. Armed action should be the final remedy.

- The secret nature of the assassinations requires intelligence operations to detect and arrest the masterminds rather than a military operation that may strike innocents.

- Haftar 's disagreement with the groups he targeted is not related to the assassinations but rather to political and ideological differences that date back to the liberation war.

- The non-Islamists who oppose Haftar 's use of force, including senior military officers, believe that he is not qualified to lead the process of enforcing security given his propensity for violence and his significant past errors that prove he lacks the capacity to stop the bloodshed in Benghazi.

Disrupting the transition process

Al-Jala' Hospital's emergency room in Benghazi reported that fighting at the beginning of Haftar 's attack resulted in seventy deaths and 141 injuries. The casualties came from different cities and villages, including Benghazi, Shahat, Marj and Abyar, areas of high tribal density, making it possible that confrontations will tend to escalate and that the number of victims will increase.

The powerful armed Al-Qaqa' and Sawa'eq brigades, which are affiliated with the Zintan tribe, have announced their support for Haftar and stormed the headquarters of the National Congress and the hospitality palaces, adding yet another dimension to the conflict. The head of the National Congress, in his capacity as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, responded to Al-Qaqa' and Sawa'eq brigades' actions by calling Libya

Shield Forces (Libya Shield) of the western and central regions to move to secure the capital. They are superior to the Al-Qaqa' and Sawae'q brigades in number, weapons and experience.

Libya Shield Forces have successfully reined in these two brigades on previous occasions and it is likely they will impose a balance of power in the capital and abort the impact of these brigades. In the event that the situation cannot be contained, the outcome could be serious, and may push other tribes to enter the conflict as well as external powers.

External considerations

There is no doubt that Haftar recognises the allure of using "war on terror" on regional and international levels, especially after the military coup in Egypt. He also knows that the fight against terrorism is among the US' key priorities in Libya. Perhaps he believes that Washington is looking for ways to counter terrorism domestically after failed direct intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the poor outcome of targeting militants with drones, with civilian victims greatly outnumbering targeted insurgents. It is therefore likely that some regional and international powers may be interested in supporting Haftar 's move. Haftar is keen on opening ties with the new regime in Egypt, and he has declared that he approves of Egyptian military strikes against the groups he is fighting on Libyan territory. Political logic dictates that Haftar is looking for a regional ally and external support, given that his ambition goes beyond limited military operations to a comprehensive change, as confirmed during his interview earlier this year with Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper. (3)

Possible outcomes

This section of the paper discusses two possible paths – either the continuation of violence or some type of peaceful resolution.

Violence

Violence is very likely because the basis of Haftar 's strategy is to overcome his opponents by force. This is a decision he reached after reviewing the available options, particularly since he has been preparing for this move more than two years. (4)

This scenario is enhanced by the increasing numbers of his supporters and their endorsement of the "war on terror" slogan. There is also the possibility of US support in one form or another, focusing on targeting specific militant groups known to Washington. The possible consequences of this scenario are as follow:

- The first day of clashes claimed dozens of lives and over a hundred people were injured, most of them from Haftar 's forces. The losses suffered that day can

seriously damage Haftar 's reputation as a military leader, casting doubt on any possibility of success.

- Haftar and his forces will not regain the balance of power unless the Al-Saeqa forces, the Army of Burqa and Ibrahim Jadharan militants join them. There is no guarantee who will win the battle, since it is expected that the confrontation will be fierce. In the event that Haftar 's opponents lose, it is expected that they will launch intermittent operations to strike Haftar 's forces as well as a campaign to assassinate his aides in a manner that will be difficult to counter.

- The command to evacuate neighbourhoods of the city may have been counterproductive, particularly as it came after a failure in the first attack, and heavy losses in lives and weaponry. This means falling under the pressure of unorganised reactions that may push for the use of heavy weapons in inhabited areas such as Al-Qawarsheh neighbourhood, something already happening with the air force targeting opponents.

- Escalation of violence and expansion of confrontations will not be devoid of provincial division and polarisation based on tribal and district affiliation in Benghazi. This is very possible if all established forces join Haftar on the basis of regionalisation, and is particularly serious in the west where tribal polarisation is extreme, as evidenced by the blood spilled during the February war and subsequent clashes over the past two years.

- This scenario means that the country will enter into a civil war that will seriously hamper any possibility of establishing a balanced and stable political system, especially since Haftar has the support of tribes and regions who were against the 17 February revolution. In this sense, there would be a move to settle old and new scores.

Peaceful resolution

This stems from the fear of civil war and destroyed hopes of Libyans to enjoy decent and prosperous lives. Here a constellation of political forces, social components, elites and other actors will mediate to prevent the deterioration of the situation and to settle the conflict peacefully. At the forefront of such negotiations would be agreement on the issues referred to above, such as alternatives to contain the situation or mitigate its severity, including the possibility of terminating the National Congress and embarking on a new phase through a permanent Parliament. It is possible that this scenario will not be acceptable to Haftar as it links his fate to the ballot box; where he will face stiff competition from prominent leading politicians, including Dr. Mahmoud Jibril.

Exacerbating the crisis

Haftar 's move will worsen the situation in Libya rather than resolve it. He gambled on a military solution in a country that lacks a strong military institution which can impose control on all the armed forces. He will face armed formations that reject subjection by force. Their resistance will intensify as they consider his move hostile to their fundamental ideology (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood), or hostile to their provinces (e.g. the people of Tripoli fear domination by the Burqa province to which Haftar belongs), or even hostile to their tribes.

Benghazi boils down the complexities facing Haftar 's move. It is the area to which he belongs and from which he leads his operation. He needs it as a platform, but it presents major challenges that he has to address or eliminate. It is one of the areas of Libya most insistent on political Islam, which Haftar seeks to eliminate. Benghazi is the city which launched the revolution and suffered from military rule, while Haftar wants to impose himself on the country as a military man. Thus, this begs the question of how Haftar can succeed if his own city stands in the way of his desire for control.

1) There is controversy on Khalifa Haftar 's rank given it was not based on the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces' decision.

2) The value and type of needs were estimated by the joint security team and the Security Directorate of Benghazi.

3) Khalid Mahmood, "Haftar : Our Goal is Ridding Libya of the Muslim Brotherhood" ("Haftar : Hadafuna Tantheef Libya min Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimeen"), Sharq Al Awsat 20 May 2014, http://beta.aawsat.com/home/article/100236.

4) Ibid.