

Policy Briefs

The Sirte-Jufra line:

a front in the war or the basis of negotiations?

**Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*

August 2 2020





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Starting in mid-April 2020, the Government of National Accord (GNA)—the legitimate Libyan government—scored a series of rapid military victories against Khalifa Haftar, the retired general backed by Russia, the UAE, Egypt and France. After ejecting Haftar’s forces from the western coastal strip and the Tripoli environs, in early June, GNA forces took the key city of Tarhouna, previously the base of Haftar’s operations in western Libya. In the days that followed, the GNA seemed determined to push eastward toward Sirte and Jufra and then to the oil triangle, but the GNA advance was stopped by targeted airstrikes, likely Russian. Since then, the two sides have settled into a stalemate, with no decisive military action seen in recent weeks and no tangible progress toward a ceasefire or negotiations, despite some promising efforts.

How long can the stalemate last? What are the factors favouring or militating against a military or diplomatic solution? And where do all the parties to the conflict currently stand, both the Libyan actors and the multiple foreign states involved in Libya?

The GNA’s victories shifted the balance of power and spurred recalculations among the parties to the conflict. The UAE redoubled its support for Haftar, but France distanced itself from the general, denying any military involvement in the country while decrying Turkish intervention on the side of the GNA.

Militarily, Russia appears to have dug in further, shoring up its combat forces in the country. In late May, it reportedly deployed 14 fighter jets to Libya, and in the weeks that followed, dozens of flights were observed between Syria and Benghazi, thought to be carrying Syrian mercenaries recruited by Russia. Russian mercenaries have also reportedly deployed to major oil and gas fields, and Moscow has informed the GNA that the Sirte-Jufra front is a red line that cannot be crossed. Politically, however, Russia appears ready to abandon Haftar as its partner in Libya, throwing its support instead behind Aguila Saleh, the president of the House of Representatives in the east.

As for Turkey, its backing of the GNA—which was the decisive factor in the latter’s military victories—has been tempered by its wariness of Russia. Throughout the last month, the GNA has pressured Turkey for additional military assistance to defeat Haftar and his allies in Sirte, but Turkey has held back to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia.

On the diplomatic front, all parties are involved in behind-the-scenes initiatives and informal talks designed to set the stage for a ceasefire and/or negotiations. Most importantly, Morocco recently hosted both Aguila Saleh and Khalid al-Mishri, the chair of the GNA’s High Council of State. Surprisingly, Mishri signalled that the GNA was prepared to amend the 2015 Skhirat Agreement to satisfy all parties while reiterating that the agreement remained the foundation for any future negotiations, thereby indicating that Tripoli will not negotiate with Haftar, but is open to talks with Saleh.

Although all indications are that most of the principal players favour a political resolution, the military situation will remain volatile as long as Haftar’s forces are in Sirte and remain in control of the economically vital oil region. As a basis of negotiations, the GNA is demanding that Haftar withdraw from Sirte, while Turkey seems to be trying to persuade Moscow to have Haftar withdraw from Jufra and Sirte in advance of a ceasefire, followed by negotiations where Saleh—not Haftar—would represent eastern Libya. Even if Turkey’s efforts do not succeed, in the current circumstances, Turkey would likely not support a GNA offensive against Sirte, since that would bring it into open conflict with Russia. That could change, however, if the US shifted its stance to become more aggressive about countering Russia in Libya and backing the GNA.

Ultimately, although the stalemate may persist for some time, the GNA is in a much better position than it was six months ago. Tripoli is more secure, and the military and political balance of power has tipped its way. There is still the issue of stopping Haftar from exporting oil from the central and southern oil fields, but provided the general does not make another push westward, goaded by the UAE, Egypt or Russia, there is no real threat now to the GNA and the areas under its control. Although Haftar is not yet done militarily, he will likely not be an important political player moving forward.

***This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available here:**

<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4753>.