

Civil war clashes erupt in Libya

By Marianne Arens
10 September 2018

A fragile truce prevails in the Libyan capital of Tripoli following fierce fighting last week. The city's Mitiga airport remains closed and fighting is continuing in the south of the city.

The conflict that broke out between armed militias on August 27 was fought with tanks and heavy artillery. Entire neighbourhoods went up in flames. According to the local health authority, there were 63 dead and 171 injured. Some 2,000 people have been driven from their homes, and the fate of some 8,000 refugees trapped in camps in Tripoli remains uncertain.

The latest round of civil war strife highlights the neo-colonial ambitions of the imperialist powers. The European Union and United States have reacted with alarm to the fighting in the country, which is their gateway to Africa and access route to vast oil and gas resources. The EU is particularly worried about the future of the puppet regime of Fayeze al-Sarraj, which it relies upon to keep refugees out of Europe.

The fighting in Tripoli has also revived longstanding conflicts between Italy and France—not only aggravating the political interests of the governments in Rome and Paris, but also the rivalry between Eni and Total, the major oil and energy companies of each country. Libya has the largest oil and gas fields in Africa and the ninth largest in the world.

Eni has been active in the former Italian colony since 1959 and had a quasi-monopoly position in the Libyan oil and gas sector prior to the NATO-led overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011. Since then, Total has sought to outdo Eni, with both companies supporting different militias in their quest to win the upper hand in the oil and gas business.

Italian Interior Minister and leader of the far-right Lega party, Matteo Salvini has openly accused France of being responsible for the chaos in Libya. “Obviously, someone is behind it,” Salvini told journalists on September 4, “...something like this does not happen by accident.” This same someone has endangered “for national economic interests ... the stability of all North Africa and thus of Europe,” Salvini continued, and added: “Ask Paris!”

Italian Defense Minister Elisabetta Trenta (Five-Star Movement, M5S) also blamed France for the armed conflict.

“There is no denying that Libya is in this situation today because someone put their own interests above those of the Libyans and all of Europe in 2011” she wrote on Facebook. “France has a responsibility, we cannot ignore it.”

For months, the Italian government has been accusing French President Emmanuel Macron of intervening in Libya without consulting its EU partners. At the end of May 2018, Macron invited Sarraj and General Khalifa Haftar to Paris to agree on a plan for Libyan parliamentary elections next December. For the Italian government, which regards Libya as its colonial backyard, Macron's initiative amounts to inadmissible interference.

Unlike Italy, France works closely with General Haftar, who represents the alternative-parliament in Tobruk. The Libyan Liberation Army, LNA, led by Haftar, controls most of the oil crescent on the northeast coast of Libya. Haftar also has the backing of the regional powers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, while Qatar, Iran and Turkey support the UN-recognised Sarraj “unity government.”

Salvini also relies on Sarraj because he needs the Libyan coast guard as a force to seal off the Mediterranean from refugees. Only recently, Italy signed an alliance with the unity government to provide the coast guard with weapons, logistics and naval boats worth several million euros.

Since 2014, Italy has expanded its military presence in Libya. Today, the Italian army maintains a 350-member military unit in Misrata whose mission is officially to secure a military hospital. In reality, it is mandated by the Italian government to “protect certain sensitive areas in Libya, including the oil wells.” It also has the task of training the Libyan coast guard to deter immigrants from reaching Europe by any means possible.

The conflicts between France and Italy date back to the NATO war against Libya seven years ago. At that time, NATO obliterated the functioning state of Libya and brutally murdered its leader, Muammar al-Gaddafi. Since then, the country has been plagued by chaos and civil war.

Italy had initially rejected a NATO intervention led by France, the United States and Great Britain. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had signed a cooperation treaty

with Gaddafi in 2008. The treaty provided a miserly compensation for the historic crimes resulting from Italy's colonial rule, while granting the Italian oil industry privileged trade relations with Tripoli. Gaddafi also pledged to prevent African refugees fleeing to Europe.

In the course of the war, however, Italy changed its attitude, so as not to end up empty handed when it came time to distribute the spoils of war. It provided logistical support and missile launchers in Sicily for the war. Nevertheless, Italian politicians repeatedly blame France's role in the 2011 war for the refugee crisis. Roberto Fico (M5S), president of the Chamber of Deputies, described the Libyan situation as a "serious problem left to us by France."

For its part the German government has no interest in an intra-European conflict at the moment. On September 5, the German foreign minister Heiko Maas sought to pursue a policy of appeasement in Libya: "The weapons must be silent, any renewed escalation must be avoided," read a statement by the Foreign Office.

This does not mean that Germany is staying out of the neo-colonial race for Africa. On the contrary, as part of its foreign and security policy reversal, Germany is endeavoring to correct the "flaw" of its foreign policy of 2011, i.e. the fact that it did not participate in the Libyan war. It is now intent on building up its military presence in Africa. Currently, the Bundeswehr is deployed in countries surrounding Libya, in Mali, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, South Sudan and in the Mediterranean.

The US is also preparing for new military intervention in North Africa. In the Nigerian desert town of Agadez, a hub of the traditional Tuareg nomadic tribes, the US Air Force is currently expanding its base for drones and fighter aircraft—the Niger Airbase 201. From bases in Italy, US fighter jets have regularly bombed Libya in recent years.

Germany's main economic rival in Africa, however, is China. The People's Republic has become the largest investor in Africa and announced billions of new investments a few days ago at an Africa summit in Beijing, involving all African countries.

With a high-ranking business delegation, German chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) recently visited several African countries and promised them German assistance for industrialization and infrastructure. In the Sahel countries, the Bundeswehr and France are helping to build the new G5 Sahel Resilience Force, which has around 5,000 troops stationed in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso.

For these reasons, the German bourgeoisie favours a united EU position on Libya. A "viable solution" can only be achieved "under the auspices of the United Nations," a Foreign Ministry statement reads. However, the UN is far

from solving the problems in Libya.

On September 5, Ghassan Salamé, UN Special Envoy for Libya, said in a video message that "only a façade of tranquility" prevails in Tripoli and the Libyan capital is "on the verge of a full-blown war." He demanded that the UN-backed Sarraj government finally implement the security provisions set out in the 2015 Skhirat Agreement and disarm all militias.

The puppet regime of Sarraj, however, lacks the means to do so. Since the overthrow of Gaddafi seven years ago, the country's military forces have been divided into the hands of rival militias who have plundered everything left of the Gaddafi state. They control the oil fields and economic facilities, extort protection money, run murder squads, administer the many prisons and refugee camps and offer their services to varying imperialist powers for high amounts of foreign exchange.

The most recent riots broke out when the 7th Brigade of Tarhuna invaded southern Tripoli. This brigade, which was originally founded by King Idris Senussi and also served Gaddafi, still counts a number of Gaddafi loyalists among its officers. When the Sarraj government tried to cut its budget in August, the brigade struck back, claiming it wanted to settle accounts with the corrupt militia cartel to which it had previously belonged.

The 7th Brigade was eventually repulsed by auxiliary troops from Misrata. No less than four different militias are currently active in Tripoli.

These militias hold Libya in a stranglehold and condemn the population to unimaginable poverty and lack of any prospects. In the country where access to schools and hospitals was free, there is now no guarantee of clean drinking water, electricity or a functioning sewage system. Many foodstuffs and basic goods are only available on the black market and at horrendous prices.

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