



## VIENNEAST COMPASS: LIBYAN CONFLICT & MIGRATION OUTLOOK

### OUTLOOK:

- **A change of the GNA's political leadership is expected in the coming weeks with Fathi Bashaga favoured as next Prime Minister;**
- **Re-escalation in fighting around Tripoli since February has merely reinforced the stalemate between opposing forces, but any political settlement to the conflict remains a distant prospect;**
- **The military situation is likely to create the conditions for a new refugee crisis likely to impact southern Europe over the summer.**

While European countries have been preoccupied with the coronavirus crisis, nearby armed conflicts persist without interruption. In Libya, the latest chapter of its civil war, which has lasted for over half a decade, opened in April 2019 with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's unsuccessful attempt to seize the capital Tripoli with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces ('LAAF'). And over the first months of 2020 the conflict has escalated once again, threatening to send a new wave of refugees perilously across the Mediterranean towards the shores of southern Europe.

Since January, rival international backers of the Benghazi-based LAAF and the opposing Tripoli-based UN-recognised Government of National Accord ('GNA') have stepped up military supplies to both sides. First, the UAE started flying in thousands of tons of materiel to the LAAF, indicating plans for a fresh offensive. Turkey then responded by shipping some 7000 tons of supplies to GNA-affiliated militias. The combatants have also received foreign equipment, critical expertise and manpower: the GNA has benefitted from Turkish-operated drones, early warning and air defence systems (including from two Turkish navy frigates), as well as some 4000 Syrian mercenaries, while the LAAF has been supported with Russian Pantsir air defence systems, military contractors and UAE air support.

The result, once again, has been stalemate. In February, LAAF forces shelled the Port of Tripoli before launching a campaign against important locations to the west of the city. But a counterattack by GNA forces then recaptured several key areas including strategic towns and facilities. Exacerbating the balance of forces is a general unwillingness by local militias of whatever allegiance to commit to costly campaigns beyond their home areas. And yet, notwithstanding a year of indecisive conflict that has killed and displaced thousands, each side has drawn false confidence from their foreign backers and periodic but limited tactical battlefield gains. Several internationally-brokered peace initiatives have foundered as a result, and any resolution to the conflict looks as remote as ever.

Within the anti-Haftar camp, however, change is afoot. Militias who have found common cause in resisting the LAAF's advance, and in so doing loosely form the



GNA's military forces, have grown increasingly disillusioned with the political leadership in Tripoli and its prospects of establishing its authority countrywide. We understand this has encouraged a competition to replace PM Fayez Al-Sarraj, with interior minister Fathi Bashagha (who has strong backing from Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood) currently leading the race as his successor. Rival candidates are rumoured to include Libyan Health Under-secretary Mohamed Haitham – an unlikely contender in view of his lack of militia support as well as widespread and credible corruption allegations against him – and Faisal Gergab, head of the Libya Post, Telecommunications and Information Holding Company.

At the same time, in view of his favour from the UN as well as Turkey, it is likely that Al-Sarraj will stay on as head of the Presidential Council ('PC'). Current Vice President of the PC Ahmed Maiteeq – whose powerbase in Misrata has provided the GNA's best-trained militias – will also maintain his influence at the very least.

Reports of a leadership challenge come amid a turf war over economic and monetary policy between Al-Sarraj and the Governor of the Central Bank of Libya ('CBL'), Saddek El Kaber. The CBL's strict policies on streamlining funds have created political problems for Al-Sarraj, resulting in late salary payments and inflation, compounded by El Kaber's refusal to extend letters of credit ('LCs') allowing traders to import essential commodities amid shortages exacerbated by conflict and coronavirus. In response, Al-Sarraj triggered executive powers, such as activating family allowances and cutting subsidies, whilst cutting government salaries by 20%. Although El Kaber has backed down and ordered the CBL to resume LCs, the spat is seen as a further sign that Al-Sarraj's grip is weakening.

It is debatable what practical impact a GNA leadership reshuffle will have on the conflict. In any scenario, the systemic hostilities and partisan interests that have perpetuated the fighting so far are unlikely to be much affected, as the principal kingmakers both internally and among foreign backers are personally invested in achieving a victory. Misplaced confidence and the mirage of optimism can therefore be expected to continue fanning the flames over the months ahead, even as the conflict further entrenches a regional standoff between its foreign underwriters on both sides. The impact on Libya and its population is likely to send out ripples that will be felt across the Mediterranean, regardless of whether Italy and its European neighbours are in any position to withstand a fresh crisis.

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