

September 2016

The Power Struggle behind the New “Battle of Sirte”

Virginie Collombier

The military campaign launched mid-May to liberate the city of Sirte from Islamic State (IS) fighters that have controlled it for one year is still ongoing. While hopes were initially high that the battle could be won quickly, it has proved more difficult than expected, recently leading to direct military intervention by the United States through aerial raids conducted against IS positions in the city. These constitute significant support to the forces affiliated with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) fighting on the ground in Sirte, and might eventually prove decisive to chase IS forces out of their North African stronghold. Yet the hope fueled early on by some that the new “Battle of Sirte” would lead Libya’s main competing factions to unite against IS behind the GNA, therefore reinforcing the latter’s legitimacy and authority across the country, has proved to be remarkably detached from the reality of the power struggle in today’s Libya.

The Presidential Council of the GNA, led by Fa’ez Seraj, was established in Tripoli last March with the support of the international community after strong pressure was exerted on the participants in the UN-led political dialogue to sign the Libyan Political Accord (LPA) in December 2015. This happened despite persistent opposition from powerful factions and constituencies, chief among them Major-General Khalifa Haftar and his allies in Eastern Libya. The gamble was that this development would encourage LPA opponents to eventually align with the new internationally-supported authorities.

From December 2015 onwards, the priority (and main challenge) for the United Nations Mission Support in Libya (UNSMIL) and foreign supporters was to ensure that the GNA could return to the country and work safely out of Tripoli. The security arrangements they negotiated with some of the main military groups controlling the capital (in particular the Halbus and al-Mahjub brigades of Misrata, as well as Islamist brigades such as the “Rada” Special

Deterrent Forces led by Salafist ‘Abdulrauf Kara) eventually were worked out, and have thus far proven durable, allowing Seraj and his team to take control of the main government buildings and ministries. Such a step has been important, at least symbolically, both for the Libyan supporters of the GNA (essentially in the west and south of the country) and its foreign backers.

The GNA was soon confronted with another challenge, however, as it faced pressure to meet expectations. For Libyan citizens, the priorities were the dual crises of cash and electricity, which required urgent solutions. For the international community, though, the focus was on the fight against IS, first and foremost in the coastal city of Sirte. The GNA’s inability to deliver on the provision of basic services resulted in a rapid and major loss of legitimacy among the domestic constituencies that were initially supportive of its establishment. In addition, while the majority of Libya’s competing political and military factions acknowledged the threat emanating from IS and claimed that they were ready to fight against it, the GNA revealed incapable of actually uniting these forces and exerting control over them. Instead of encouraging unity among Libyan groups and factions, the Battle of Sirte and the fight against IS have indeed underlined the continuing divisions among Libyan rival parties, as well as the fierce nature of the competition for power and resources. In this context, foreign actors have tremendous influence on the evolution of the conflict as they provide recognition, material support, or merely a legitimising narrative to warring parties.

The GNA was quick to display its weakness and deficiencies when the Battle of Sirte started in May 2016. Being totally deprived of its own military capabilities, it had no other choice but to rely on those of others, and in particular on military groups from Misrata, the city which had come to constitute its main domestic backer both politically and militarily. In Misrata, the IS threat had become palpable, which the city’s leadership deemed required rapid action. For this reason, but also because they were well aware of the political opportunity of doing so, the Misratan authorities mobilised the bulk of the city’s military capabilities against IS in Sirte while reinforcing their presence in Tripoli in order not to lose ground in front of their main rivals there. The al-Bunyan al-Marsus forces that have been operating in Sirte in the name of the GNA (and officially under its umbrella) are, as such, made up in their majority of fighters from Misrata, in addition to elements from the other major cities and localities of western Libya where the GNA have no actual control or authority.

Until now, Seraj and Misrata’s leaders have acted in a way that appears complementary; in reality, however, each has been trying to take advantage of the strengths of the other (international recognition vs. military might) to increase its own? power and influence. Yet this game could become tricky when IS is eventually driven out of Sirte. A victory of the al-Bunyan al-Marsus coalition would significantly affect the balance of power within the GNA

between the forces from Misrata and its other components, and could challenge further the implementation of the LPA. When there is no longer a common interest in standing united, the mixed and fragile nature of the al-Bunyan al-Marsus coalition (made of pro- and anti-GNA groups fighting alongside, with financial support from anti-GNA forces) will also probably come to the fore and could lead to tensions between today's allies.

In the eastern anti-GNA camp led by Major-General Haftar, the Battle of Sirte and the fight against IS have not shifted the lines in favor of the LPA and the GNA either. On the contrary, despite repeated claims that he would move on to Sirte after liberating Benghazi from terrorist groups, Haftar has let the Misratan forces do the fighting in Sirte. As one of the strongest opponents of the GNA, there was of course no way he could work together with it (and even less under its authority). But by choosing to concentrate his military efforts in the region of Ajdabiya, where Libya's main oil installations are, and to directly confront the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) led by Ibrahim Jadhran, who is also responsible for military operations in Libya's central region (Ajdabiya-Sirte) in the name of the GNA, Haftar has highlighted the actual power game taking place under the disguise of the so-called fight against terrorism.

Against such a background, the Battle of Sirte might well open the way for a new series of military confrontations: between Libyan rival factions competing for power, not against IS.

About the author

Virginie Collombier research Fellow and Coordinator, Middle East Directions Programme at the European University Institute, and Libya Project Associate at the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center.

About ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilise stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee



© 2016 by the Arab Reform Initiative.

<http://www.arab-reform.net> To view a copy of this license, Click [here](#)

contact@arab-reform.net