



Libya's new strongman seeks national domination

Libya may finally find a stable government to replace former dictator Muammar Gaddafi, but under a new dictator who will take the country by conquest, Libya may become a client state of Russia.

By James Hall

Following the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, no single personality arose to be the face of the post-Gaddafi country. As civil wars brewed and militia groups multiplied, no individual has stood out. Even the leaders of the UN-backed Government of National

Accord (GNA) in Tripoli have been faceless ciphers. That has changed with the emergence of General Khalifa Haftar, leader of the eastern Libya-based Libyan National Army (LNA).



Fighters loyal to the National Transitional Council, Libya's interim government at the time, celebrate the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Photo courtesy Magharebia/Flickr

The LNA is the military force of the House of Representatives (HoR), one of Libya’s two rival governments, which won the 2014 elections. The election results were not accepted by the previous government, which then refused to vacate Tripoli. Civil war ensued, and the HoR government in exile in Tobruk made Haftar its military chief. A ceasefire was brokered by the UN in 2015. In December that year, both rival governments signed an agreement, recognising the GNA. The HoR withdrew its recognition of the GNA in March 2017.

Haftar continues to fight for control of Libya’s oil infrastructure that his LNA held in 2016 but which

was wrestled back from them by the GNA in 2017. In April 2017, Haftar was poised to attack Tripoli. With these developments, Libya now has a personality in Haftar who has become internationally recognisable. If he succeeds with his military takeover of the country, he will become Libya’s new dictator.

Russia’s man in Libya

Moscow hopes Haftar does succeed. Russia is providing moral support and may break the UN arms embargo to provide Haftar with arms. Russia’s strongman, Vladimir Putin, has found his counterpart in General Khalifa

Haftar. As a member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which supports the GNA, Russia is choosing its own interests – Libyan oil and a new ally in North Africa – over the UNSC. This was made clear in January 2017 when Haftar was flown on a Russian helicopter to the Russian aircraft carrier Kuznetsov off Syria where, in a video call, he was welcomed by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. As he had done in his visit to Moscow in November 2016, Haftar again asked the Russians for military aid and support, ostensibly against Islamic militants but, in fact, to conquer the country.

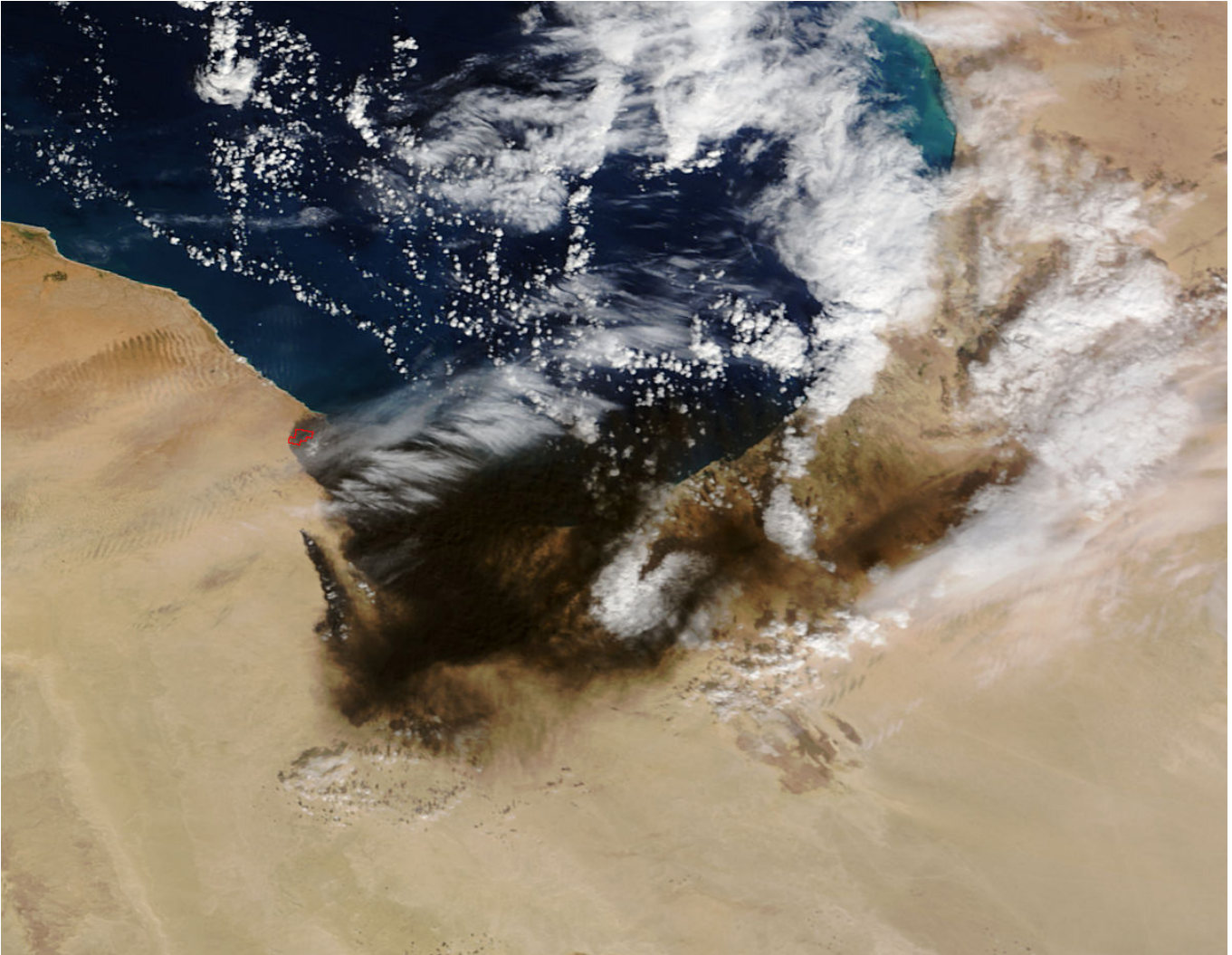
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General Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army and backed by Russia and the United Arab Emirates, has emerged as a significant political force and rival to the UN-backed Government of National Accord.

Photo courtesy Magharebia/Wikimedia Commons

In September 2016, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provided air support for a Haftar-led offensive to seize Libya’s oil terminals on behalf of the Tobruk government. The oil installations are key to Libya’s economic rebirth. Libya has 48.36 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, the ninth largest of any country in the world. Government, with the assistance of international partners, like the US, had taken control of most of the oil infrastructure, and by 2013, nearly 900,000 barrels a day were being produced. Natural gas production is also lucrative. Yearly, around 11.8 billion cubic metres of natural gas are produced, of which 5.8 billion are used locally and 6 billion are exported. Haftar’s continuing efforts to control the oil infrastructure has been condemned by the US, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK.



Satellite imagery shows smoke generated by burning oil storage tanks during an attack on a refinery in Sidra, northeast Libya, January 2017.

Photo courtesy NASA Goddard Space Flight Center/Wikimedia Commons

Accommodation or appeasement? Neither will stop Haftar

Aware of Haftar's powerful army and backing by Russia and the UAE, the GNA recognises that it must engage and include him in an inclusive government. As GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al-Sarraj resignedly said in September 2016, "We have no choice but dialogue and reconciliation." Haftar sees no point in either. He has rejected the GNA and put forth himself as the man Libyans must seek to unify the country. About a political solution to the fractured country, General Thomas

Waldhauser, commander of the US Africa Command, said in February 2017 that, "there's no doubt about the fact that Haftar and his influence is something that has to be dealt with."

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US President Donald Trump is not only close to Russia's Putin but is enamoured with strongmen rulers. The US seems to have no objection to Russia's embrace of Haftar or recognition of Haftar as a significant player who was acknowledged by General Waldhauser. European policy makers who are informed on Libya have no illusions about Haftar. British lawmaker Crispin Blunt, the chair of the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee, cautioned, "Haftar needs to be part of the solution; but the suggestion that he is the solution falls apart [given] the realities of Libya. He is a divisive figure and it is more than an inconvenient truth that can

be fudged.” To Europeans, Haftar, who plays on ethnic divisions, may gain control of the country’s military but will unleash ethnic and sectarian divisions that will further destabilise the country.

Ending Libya’s impasse with more warfare

The scenario is clear: General Haftar has no interest in negotiating with the UN-backed GNA, and the GNA’s announced desire to rewrite the constitution to find a place of power for this one individual is weak and ineffectual against Haftar’s influence. Such

appeasement seems desperate, while Haftar is making conquests on the ground. With Russian and UAE backing, Haftar will militarily conquer Libya. Ostensibly fighting on behalf of the Tobruk government, he will dump that regime like unwanted baggage when his conquests are finalised and install himself as national leader.

Whether he is a ‘divisive figure’ is irrelevant; dictators do not have to be popular for they have power. They also have armies to suppress dissent. The US has not signalled opposition to Russia’s

apparent support of Haftar over the GNA. After six years of civil war and bloody militia incursions, and the arrival of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the country’s still lawless areas, the Libyan people will have returned to their status in 2011 of living under an autocrat, if Haftar assumes control.

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ACM ANALYSIS IN BRIEF | *Libya’s new strongman seeks national domination*

No personality emerged as the face of governance, following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, until General Khalifa Haftar’s military conquests in the east presented him as a formidable power. With Russian backing, Haftar will likely end six years of chaos but by becoming Libya’s next dictator.

Key points:

- To further Moscow’s own interests, Russia is going against the UNSC by supporting General Haftar’s confrontations with Libya’s UN-backed government
- The US, like Libya’s Government of National Accord, seeks to appease Haftar
- Haftar will capture Libya militarily and set up a divisive dictatorship

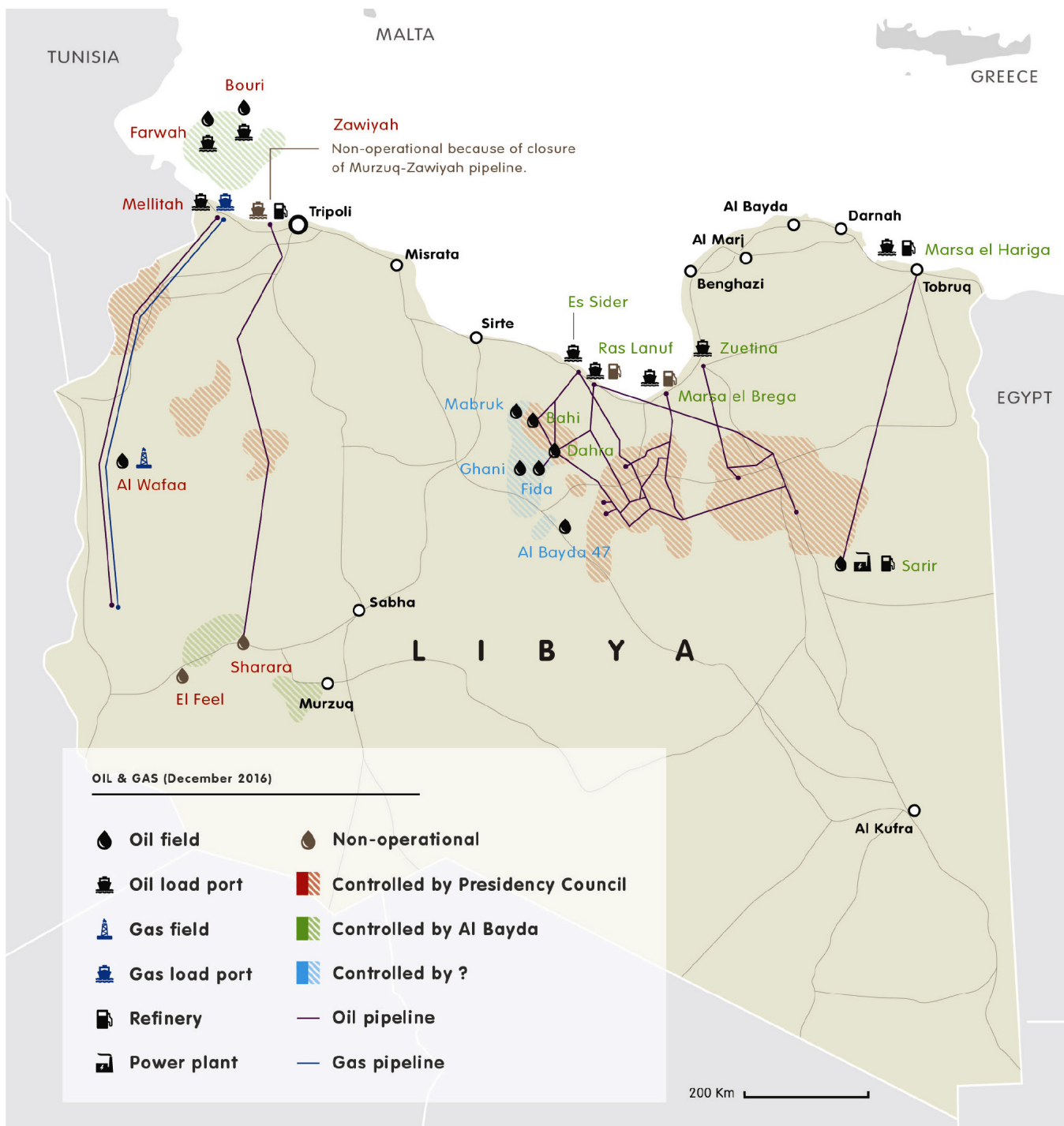
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Source: European Council on Foreign Relations

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CONTACT US

Subscription & Advertising Enquiries

In On Africa (IOA):

info@inonafrika.com

Jonathan Mundell (IOA CEO):

jonathan@inonafrika.com

Article Contributions

James Hall (ACM Founding Editor):

james@inonafrika.com

General Enquiries & Feedback

Claire Furphy (ACM Production Co-ordinator):

claire@inonafrika.com



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