



## LIBYA 2019: HAFTAR'S YEAR?

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**K**halifa Belqasim Haftar, a high-ranking soldier with deep political ambitions, is in many ways representative of Libya and its conflicted character. He rose through the ranks initially under Ghaddafi's protection but fell out of favour during the war with Chad, mainly because of a plot against the regime hatched with fellow prisoners of war. He was released through American intervention and then lived in the USA for decades, returning in 2011 during the Libyan revolution which toppled the Great Leader and the system Haftar had opposed for over 40 years.

Since then, his name ever more closely linked with the fortunes of Cyrenaica and the Libyan House of Representatives (HoR) exiled in 2014, he has managed to survive civil war, tribal conflict and international pressure. Through political action even more than military strategy he has weakened the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and its leader Fajez al-Serraj, a government that has never been more than fragile.

Though the GNA has the official support of the United Nations and the special envoys of its UNSMIL, Tripoli is still in chaos while Haftar watches from the top of the Fezzan dunes. Day by day he has managed to overcome friction among the tribes of Cyrenaica and to attract interest and support, material as well as moral, from such middle-ranking foreign powers as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. His voice has increasingly been heard in Europe, too: Italy, for example, which had been deaf to his initial pleas when the revolution ended, has now quite changed its tune, and at November's conference on Libya in Palermo the Libyan general was allowed to steal the show.

Haftar has not only gained ground politically; he has also won territory. His military grip on the Libyan desert has

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not weakened, and he now holds some key points in the Fezzan, at the very gates of Tripolitania. Many people think this will be his limit, that his power has peaked and his fortunes can only wane in future; many believe him to be unwell, too old and too weary to wield power, and assume it will pass to his children. Yet over the last eight years in Tripolitania and the Fezzan Haftar has succeeded in doing what no-one else could: unifying – albeit militarily – a vast and heterogeneous territory, with the rationale of combating Islamic extremism of all kinds, and gaining the more or less covert support of a considerable portion of the international community.

After a very difficult summer, especially in the settlements around Tripoli, hints of good news appear to be bringing a thread of hope. A new roadmap seems to be emerging, which should lead to election this spring, though uncertainty about the timing will continue for some months. At the Paris talks on 29 May 2018 the French President Emmanuel Macron and others who were pressing for an agreed date for elections (10 De-

cember had been pencilled in) had a clear objective: to reconsider the UN-sponsored government's legitimacy and facilitate a political victory for Haftar.

If the forthcoming election gives Haftar and his allies even a relative majority then the game would be over: the general would be able to point to clear leadership credentials buttressed by a renewed international legitimacy. But in any case one may wonder whether Haftar will be willing to bury the hatchet with the westeners and chase an increasingly tenuous dream of democracy, especially if the election fails to materialize. The country's need for stability and the political alignment of some international players would anyway seem to be moving things unmistakably his way; but it is not yet clear whether this will be an institutionalized progressive process within a country under reconstruction, maintaining domestic and international equilibrium, or on the contrary a much quicker and more violent development.