



Remarkable Shift:

Implications of the Meeting of US Envoy to Libya with Haftar in Cairo

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The US Embassy in Libya recently announced that US Special Envoy and Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland met General Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army in Cairo between August 11-12 2021, as part of US efforts to support the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for December.

The announcement followed statements in which Norland noted Haftar's role in unifying the Libyan army. Norland also called on regional and international parties to help in the removal of foreign forces from Libya, much to the anger of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, who sensed a change in Washington's attitude towards their organization.

This was made even more evident when Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the second son of Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi, spoke to the New York Times in an interview published on July 30. In the interview, Qaddafi asserted that he would run for president in the coming elections. The development indicates Washington's current attitude towards parties to the conflict in Libya and its potential approval of Gaddafi's presidential candidacy.

This attitude, coupled with Norland's public meeting with Haftar in Cairo, raised questions about the causes of rapprochement with Haftar, as well as about the possibility of US lowering its bets on the

Muslim Brotherhood in the future, and whether the administration of President Joe Biden is embracing a new policy towards the organization, especially after their evident failure in Tunisia.

Eastern Libya's Cohesion

The realization of the consistency of the stance of eastern Libya and the Libyan National Army's success in controlling the security situation in eastern Libya was among the factors that encouraged the US Administration to reconsider its attitude towards parties to the Libyan conflict.

This is in stark contrast with the ongoing conflict between militias in western Libya, frequently escalating to armed clashes over illegal immigrants and oil smuggling routes.

The cohesion of the eastern Libya camp became even more evident due to a number of security and political factors:

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1- Haftar's Rise: Washington recognized that Haftar's is gaining more power in Libya. Norland's recent meeting with the Haftar in Cairo came after the Libyan commander's statements made on the 81st anniversary of the Libyan army, in which he emphasized the national forces' cohesion and commitment to a peaceful settlement to the Libyan crisis.

Before these statements, Haftar issued military orders appointing and promoting a large number of the army commanders, especially the staff officers of the air and land forces. The orders represent a significant indication of Haftar's strong hold on the Libyan army and that he is still a force to be reckoned with in any arrangements for a settlement to the crisis in the country.

2-Neutralizing ISIS'capabilities: The Libyan National Army recently conducted military operations against ISIS in southern Libya. The operations proved that the army is capable of combating rising terrorism in the south in particular, amid signs of contacts militias affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in western Libya and terrorist groups in the south. Moreover, the national army succeeded in neutralizing security threats posed by the Brotherhood and their regional allies.

3- Taking control of the oilfields: The national army succeeded in taking control of all Southern and Eastern Libya, in addition to Sirte and al-Jafra in central Libya and the oil crescent which holds the country's largest oil fields and ports such as Sharara field and Tobruk seaport.

Lands under the control of the Libyan National Army hold around two thirds of the country's oilfields which US oil companies competing with Italian and French companies try to get new exploration contracts in the south to make huge profits.

4- Reducing Russia's Wanger Group Mercenary Force: Recently, Haftar worked on reducing the presence of Russian mercenaries operating under Wagner Group, and terminate the contracts of Russian military advisers who worked with the Libyan army over the past years. Hafar, who was acting on a request from the United States, won support from Washington who was always concerned by the

presence of Russians in eastern Libya and demanded their departure.

5- Rapprochement with Saleh: Haftar's success in bridging differences with Aguila Saleh, speaker of the eastern-based parliament, culminated in a meeting in July. The meeting indicated a return to normalcy between the two main figures of eastern and western Libya. With their understanding in place now, Haftar garnered popular support in both the east and the west thus strengthening his power and legitimacy.

Muslim Brotherhood's Mistakes

Recently, within the Muslim Brotherhood, new factors emerged to change the US Administration's attitude towards the organization. This can be outlined as follows:

1- Brotherhood's obstruction of the 55+ Committee's work: The Brotherhood and affiliated groups are reluctant to carry out all the decisions made by the 55+ Committee, formally named the 55+ Libyan Joint Military Commission, on several occasions. In the lead up to the reopening of the coastal road between Sirte and Misrata, efforts were marred by clashes and skirmishes that, sometimes, threatened the ceasefire agreement reached in October 2020.

The Brotherhood also rejected an agreement reached by the committee to urgently remove all mercenaries and foreign elements from Libya. Additionally, the organization rejected demands from the National Unity Government to freeze any agreements and memorandums of understanding with any state, in reference to Turkey.

2- Turkey's interference in Western Libya: Turkish interference in the political and military decision-making process in Western Libya is increasing. This was evidenced by frequent visits by officials of the new executive authority, namely the head of the Presidency Council Mohammed al-Manfi and Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dbeibah, to Turkey.

These visits come under a request for consultation from Turkish government regarding internal affairs. Since he took office as head of the National Unity Government, Dbeibah kept reiterating commitment



to agreements signed with Turkey. For its part, Turkey recently asserted that it will not withdraw from Libya, according to statements by Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, ahead of Dbeibah's visit to Turkey where he discussed the return of Turkish companies to Libya.

3- Disruption of the coming elections: The Muslim Brotherhood works to the best of their ability to obstruct the coming parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for December 2021. To achieve this goal, representatives of the organization exert strong pressure and attempts within the Libya Political Dialogue Forum that resulted in delaying the approval of the constitutional base of the election. Additionally, the representatives put forward


proposals to put off the presidential elections until a new constitution is formed and voted on. They also object to the candidacy of Haftar and are trying to obstruct the process by announcing their rejection to direct election of a new president. Their effort blocks the implementation of the international roadmap and threatens the course of peaceful settlement overseen by the United Nations and the United States.

That is why, Norland's meeting with Haftar come within the context of an urgent need to support difficult settlements that are required to create the constitutional base, as well as the legal framework required for holding the next elections being obstructed by the Brotherhood's positions.


To conclude, the current US attitude towards parties to the Libyan conflict is largely based on Washington's desire to preserve its strategic interests in Libya. That is why, Washington considers rapprochement with the eastern-Libya camp led by Haftar, in order to achieve its goals and bolster its presence in Libya in the coming period. It would not, however, rule out the possibility of keeping relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, but it is likely to place more pressure on the Brotherhood to modify their positions in a way that helps Washington to achieve its agenda set in its current policy on Libya.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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