

France: Strong Man Syndrome

Author: Jihâd Gillon



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by Jihâd Gillon

Libya occupies a unique place in France's history in the Maghreb. Neighbouring its former colony in Algeria, and protectorate in Tunisia, French foreign policy and the colonial strategists who initially crafted it saw their wider geo-strategic interests in Libya's vast expanse. General De Gaulle's insistence during World War II to take control of the Fezzan region was more than just about the French free forces countering Italian troops between 1942 and 1943, it was also about countering their allies in the race for influence in the Sahelo-Saharan region.¹ It was considered of the utmost strategic importance to establish a foothold in a region that shouldn't be part of the British empire in post-WWII Africa.

During the Gaddafi era, a perception of Libya as a potential threat and source of instability to the former French colonies of the Sahelo-Saharan region and their post independence status-quo began to grow, and moreover the need to respond to such a threat. This was epitomised by the Chad-Libyan conflict (1978-1987), during which rebel commander and then President of Chad Hissene Habré managed to expel Gaddafi's troops with the critical support of Paris during Opération Manta in 1983-1984 and the beginning of Opération Epervier in 1986. French socialist President at the time François Mitterrand confessed that "if Gaddafi were to stay in Libya, that's not really a matter of concern ... Gaddafi isn't eternal and the problem is therefore circumscribed. (However) Gaddafi must stop working to expand Islamic Integrisim",² a vague description of Gaddafi's ideas outlined in the Green Book, but an early French tendency to describe complex political ideologies as being vaguely Islamic.

Relations would reach a new low following the accusation that Libya was behind the crash of the DC10 UTA civil French airplane in 1989 in the Ténéré desert, in Niger, killing 170 civilians. The incident reminded the French authorities that even a weakened and increasingly isolated Mu'ammar Gaddafi could create problems.³ The trial in absentia of the six Libyan suspects - including Abdallah Senussi, Gaddafi's step brother and chief of intelligence - would lead to fifteen years of virtually non existent bilateral ties.

¹ 'La « Colonne du Tchad » s'empare de Koufra et du Fezzan' (décembre 1940-janvier 1943), 20 January 2009, <https://www.france-libre.net/koufra-fezzan/>

² Les dossiers de la CIA sur la France, 1981-2010, Vincent Nouzille

³ Sylvain Cornil, 'Attentat du DC10: de nouveaux documents accablent l'entourage de Kadhafi', 22 June 2018, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/attentat-du-dc10-de-nouveaux-documents-accablent-l-entourage-de-kadhafi_2019563.html

Gaddafi's famous rapprochement with the West, following the Iraq war in 2003, included conditions in order to open a new chapter with France. Libya's recognition of responsibility for the DC10 crash and the offer of financial compensation to the victim's families became the platform to reestablish bilateral ties. These ties would deepen following the 2007 election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Four months after he was elected, Sarkozy flew to Tripoli to secure the release of five Bulgarian nurses held in Libya since 1999.⁴ Weapons contracts and a nuclear cooperation agreement soon followed. This period remains a matter of great controversy in France, where Gaddafi is believed to have been a major contributor to the financing of Nicolas Sarkozy's electoral campaign in 2007. The trial of the now former President is still pending, yet these suspicions have fueled allegations to ulterior motives behind France's military intervention in 2011.

The Revolution

France's active role in spearheading the military campaign in the early days of the Libyan revolution is difficult to reconcile with its broader Arab Spring policy. Paris' aggressive response towards the Gaddafi regime in 2011 was not exclusively motivated by humanitarian concerns in Benghazi, under threat from Gaddafi's encroaching forces. Only a month earlier, in ex-French protectorate Tunisia, the birthplace of the revolutions, where popular uprisings toppled president Zin el Abedine Ben Ali, the French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie proposed technical support to confront and put down the protestors.⁵ This policy highlighted not only the French leadership's lack of concerns towards the aspirations of the Arab street, but that its initial policy to the Arab Spring was out of touch with Western diplomacy at the time. Following the swift Egyptian revolution, French foreign policy would not miss a third window of opportunity in North Africa as protests erupted in Benghazi on February 17th 2011. In the following weeks, France would become one of the loudest advocates at the UN Security Council to pass resolution 1973 and a powerful player within a nascent NATO coalition moving towards military intervention in Libya to protect Benghazi's civilian population and the revolution, amidst increasing rumours at the time circulating amongst the business milieu in Paris of eye watering commercial opportunities in a post-revolution post-Gaddafi Libya. Despite many pointing to French philosopher Bernard Henry Levy as France's key interlocutor following his trip to Benghazi, the French military establishment had begun to deploy its military on the ground in Benghazi, and would rely on their intelligence and relationships - in particular those of Paul Soler, a French military officer who had established relationships to rebel commanders and groups on the ground.⁶

4 Michel Despratx, 'Infirmières bulgares: le deal secret entre Sarkozy et Kadhafi,' 30 April 2012, <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2012/04/30/actualite/actualite/infirmieres-bulgares-le-deal-secret-entre-sarkozy-et-kadhafi/>

5 Samuel Laurent, 'Voyage en Tunisie : la défense de Michèle Alliot-Marie s'effondre' 16 February 2011, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/02/16/voyage-en-tunisie-la-defense-de-michele-alliot-marie-s-effondre_1480787_823448.html

6 Jihâd Gillon, 'France-Libye : le maréchal Haftar, l'ami controversé de l'Élysée' 19 March 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/909987/politique/le-marechal-haftar-lami-libyen-controverse-de-lelysee/>



Former French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian

With the election of François Hollande in 2012, Libya would take a back seat as French diplomatic attention would turn to another theatre of the Arab Spring, taking place in better-known Syria. The Libyan file would shift away from the Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Defence under Jean-Yves Le Drian. With the electoral victories of Islamist political parties in Tunisia and Egypt, and a complex civil war in Syria, Paris' new administration's regional foreign policy would progressively favor a more security and stability focussed approach towards the Middle East and North Africa. This period is notable for the increasingly close ties the Hollande administration had built with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Under the Sarkozy administration, France established a military base in the UAE, it's first and only base in the Middle East. The Hollande administration would seek to capitalise on this by establishing deeper strategic ties across defence, energy and cultural ties, and in 2013 would begin military cooperation with the UAE in Mali. At an ideological level in France, the UAE found a strategic partner who would not split hairs over a broad definition of the term Islamist to include violent and non-violent groups irrespective of it's consequences for the region's democratic transition, bringing France closer to the UAE's own ideational foreign policy in the region. During this period as the Sahel became further destabilised, the Libyan file would move from the periphery to one of the French President's top foreign policy priorities. Towards the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, Salafi Jihadist groups began threatening Mali's capital Bamako,

forcing the French military to intervene under Operation Serval to repel Al-Qaida-linked fighters. This period reshaped France's view of Libya. From Paris' point of view, and with the support of regional heads of state like Chadian President Idriss Déby, post-Gaddafi Libya, a wash with weapons for arms trafficking in addition to porous borders, became viewed as the source of the Sahel's instability and the main causes of the Salafi-Jihadist threat to the whole Sahelian region. This sparked a major change towards France's Libya policy in late 2013 and early 2014 as Paris began to search for a simple solution to the complexities of post-Gaddafi Libya.

The Strong Man Illusion

The emergence of Khalifa Haftar, who offered an uncompromising 'Strong man' approach to 'solving Libya', could not have come at a better time. When Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014 he offered a seductive 'reset button' to the perceived chaos and complexity of the Libyan revolution in 2011 and with it the simplest of solutions to Libya's complexity, a war against all those that had stood against Haftar from democratic institutions to political parties and controversially Salafi Jihadists alike under 'a purge of the Muslim Brotherhood'.⁷ France's need for a 'Strong man' in Libya was also fueled by increasing concerns in Paris about illegal immigrants passing through the Mediterranean from Libya, against a backdrop of increasing European populist rhetoric and the ideological progress of far-right parties in Europe, Haftar's solution seemed ideal to Paris. Moreover, the General seemed like a reliable figure given his military support by Abu Dhabi and Egypt in the early days of Operation Dignity with whom Paris had begun establishing strong ties to. As a result, Paris quietly developed military cooperation with Haftar in Benghazi, a point revealed in 2016, following the death of several French military personnel in a helicopter crash in Benghazi.⁸

France's foreign policy and strategic alliances to these two key authoritarian Arab powers is indirectly favored by the domestic consequences of the 2008 economic crisis. France's economy had been hit badly, and the sale of military material and combat aircrafts to Cairo and Abu Dhabi became justified as a promotion of the French workforce. This 'commerce first' approach gave Egypt and the UAE substantial leverage on French foreign policy, in particular with regards to Libya. The clear ideological synergies that developed between the three with the cultivation of a growing anti-Islamist rhetoric cemented the alliance. In this convergence of economic ties and military cooperation, ideology was the seed of a new geo political 'anti-Islamist axis' that began to grow between France, the UAE and Egypt as they established close cooperation in Libya.

⁷ Khalid Mahmoud, 'Khalifa Haftar pledges to "purge" Libya of Muslim Brotherhood' 20 May 2014, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/khalid-mahmoud/news-middle-east/khalifa-haftar-pledges-to-purge-libya-of-muslim-brotherhood>

⁸ Cyril Bensimon, Frédéric Bobin, 'Trois membres de la DGSE morts en Libye, le gouvernement libyen proteste' 21 July 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/07/20/trois-militaires-francais-tues-en-libye_4972142_3210.html



Khalifa Haftar

Significant domestic changes in France strengthened the Elysée's conviction towards its Libya policy despite Haftar's failure to take power in 2014, and the subsequent United Nations brokered peace talks to end the war through establishing the Government of National Accord (GNA) under Fayeze Serraj in 2015. The traumatizing Islamic State attacks in Paris in November 2015, a month before the establishment of the GNA, gave policy weight to the personality of Khalifa Haftar. Haftar, promoted in several French media outlets as a Libyan "De Gaulle" fighting to free his country from the plague of Salafi Jihadist, would privately remain France's favoured candidate in Libya despite France's public commitment to the GNA.⁹ In contrast, Fayeze Serraj was perceived as weak by the Elysée through this period, with the belief he had little leverage on the multitude and undisciplined armed groups controlling Tripolitania. As Haftar rejected the GNA following its arrival to Tripoli in 2016, Paris was faced with a difficult decision as to how to respond to Libya's new political crisis.

Officially, Paris approved the Skhirat agreement and its outcome but privately had many doubts over its implementation. Paul Soler, the French officer that had fought in Benghazi in 2011 had by the time of the GNA's arrival had become elevated to the status of a trusted insider in the Elysée and did not hide his preference for Haftar, encouraging the French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to meet Haftar's political adviser Fadel al-Deeb in Paris in 2015,¹⁰ and begin closer discrete political cooperation with the LAAF following the establishment of the GNA.

Despite Emmanuel Macron's election as President in May 2017, France's policy engagement towards Libya would only deepen as a result of the nomination of Jean-Yves Le Drian as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The new President, the youngest one of the Fifth Republic, sought to demonstrate France's stature on the global stage early on in his presidency and selected the Libyan crisis to solve, viewed in the Elysée as a potential easy win only two months into his presidency. During this period, France's institutional apparatus and decision makers became the subject of intense lobbying in favor of Haftar, by Emirati and Egyptian networks in the French capital, but also by the Elysée's own military advisors and Le Drian that enabled a transformation of Haftar from a military general to that of a statesman, a major political shift.

This reshaping of the crisis is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of France's foreign policy since 2011. Despite Haftar's role as a spoiler in Libya following his rejection of the UN brokered Libyan Political Agreement and the GNA, he was invited in July 2017 by the Elysée to La Celle Saint Cloud, to meet with Serraj on equal footing. Haftar is not only reshaped as a statesman, but reshaped from his role as the spoiler of Libya's 2015 peace process to a key part of its solution in 2017. Macron would host both Serraj and Haftar again in 2018 to agree unifying the LAAF under the

⁹ 'Accusée de soutenir le maréchal Haftar, la France réaffirme son appui à Tripoli' 18 April 2019, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190418-libye-france-khalifa-haftar-fayeze-al-sarraj-paris-reaffirme-soutien-gna>

¹⁰ Jihād Gillon, 'Les hommes de l'ombre de la crise libyenne' 24 February 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/739702/politique/les-hommes-de-lombre-de-la-crise-libyenne/>

GNA followed by democratic elections, despite Haftar's high profile claim in French media that "Libya is not ready for democracy".¹¹

Haftar's unilateral withdrawal from diplomatic talks to launch an assault on Tripoli in April 2019 would be a diplomatic embarrassment for Paris as it faced accusations by the GNA of having encouraged his warmongering, with Serraj calling Macron personally. The suspicion stems from Haftar's meeting with Jean-Yves Le Drian days before the attack, and the response to Haftar's question as to why he hadn't seen him for so long being "we were waiting for your victories".¹² Despite France's explicit denial of its support for Haftar during this period, Paris failed to explicitly name or condemn Haftar in its diplomatic communique's as being chiefly responsible for Libya's latest civil war. The embarrassment would continue after Haftar's staging ground for the assault Gharian fell to GNA forces in July 2019, who retrieved French procured U.S. anti tank missiles amidst Haftar's arsenal of weapons, casting suspicions by the GNA as to whether French special forces coordinated the attack with the LAAF.¹³

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¹¹ Laurent De Saint Perier, "Khalifa Haftar La Libye n'est pas encore mure pour la democratie", 5 February 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/507758/politique/khalifa-haftar-la-libye-nest-pas-encore-mure-pour-la-democratie/>

¹² Jihâd Gillon, "France - Libye: Le Marechal Haftar Lami Libyen et la controverse de L'elysee" 18 March 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/909987/politique/le-marechal-haftar-lami-libyen-controverse-de-lelysee/>

¹³ "Libya conflict: French missiles found on pro-Haftar base", 10 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48935242>

Conclusion

Since July 2019, France has retreated to the diplomatic and political periphery. France's principal military ally in Libya, the UAE, were bolstered by Russian military support, but in turn drew in Turkey, a development that has provoked major geopolitical repercussions for France within the European Union and further complicated Libya's conflict. As Haftar's Tripoli campaign collapsed in June 2020, diplomatic talks resumed in search of a compromise between the GNA and LAAF. Despite Haftar's loss of momentum, the future of Paris' foreign policy may not have entirely changed as it began to identify actors within the GNA with whom it can build a strategic relationship.

The GNA's Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha, with powerful relationships to the armed groups in Tripolitania and influence in the powerful western city of Misrata, is perceived as being a potential alternative 'Strong man' from the GNA camp. Despite Bashagha's harsh criticism of France during Haftar's assault, his recent overtures and two visits to Paris in the latter part of 2020 suggest he is willing to establish a new relationship with the French authorities. However, the latest chapter of Libya's transition has challenged Paris' foreign policy assumptions. Visible divisions amongst the GNA's armed groups and in particular the key armed groups who control the capital and have voiced their opposition to Bashagha, demonstrate the challenges ahead in Libya, and the assumptions of the 'Strong man' model.

Similarly in Haftar's stronghold in Benghazi, feuding armed groups and tribes within the LAAF have begun to demonstrate the limitations of Haftar's strong and stable model. The conclusion of the UN political process and emergence of outsiders such as Abdelhamid Debeiba and Mohamed Menfi has also demonstrated Libya's unpredictability and the costs of Paris' policy of tying itself too closely to actors whose influence could be dwindling. France's coming elections in 2022, their lack of confidence in understanding the new complex transitional environment in Libya and the return of the United States under the Biden administration could signal a lessening of Libya's priority in Paris.



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info@sadeqinstitute.org

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