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# **The Role of Qatar and UAE in the Libyan Civil War**

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### **About the Author**



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# The Role of Qatar and UAE in the Libyan Civil War

## Introduction

The foreign policy approach of the Persian Gulf States is motivated by specific threats to regional stability. The strategic goals of these states have continuously evolved since the 2011 Arab Spring based on shifts in threat perception and developments in the political transition in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya. In the regional geopolitics, Saudi Arabia has been a traditional hegemon while Qatar and UAE have emerged as regional heavyweights that intend to stir the course of events in the region. This paper would attempt to analyze the strategic role of Qatar and UAE in shaping the political trajectory of Libya in the post Arab Spring period and assess its role from the lens of regional geopolitics.

Libya shares similarity with the UAE and Qatar in terms of its small demographic size and energy-based economy. However, the two Persian Gulf states since the last decade have embarked on economic diversification to reduce their dependence on energy and focused its efforts to increase their strategic footprint through energy, trade and investment linkages (Genugten, 2017, p. 43). In case of Libya, oil continues to be the driving force behind the economy and in 2017, petroleum sector contributed to about 82 percent of export earnings and 60 percent of the total GDP (OPEC, 2017).

The foreign policy behaviour of the Persian Gulf states is determined by the presence of external security umbrella (Genugten, 2017, pp. 42-43). Al Udeid air base in Qatar built in 1996 hosts 10,000 US service personnel. The US Combined Air Operations Center, US Air Forces Central Command, US Special Operations Command Central Command and Central Command (CENTCOM) Forward Headquarters are located at the airbase. In the UAE, the US maintains around 5,000 service personnel at Al-Dhafra airbase. The US forces also utilize the port of Jebel and Fujairah naval base. The presence of this security guarantee provided by the US allows Qatar and UAE to engage in strategic initiatives without worrying about military retaliation (Wallin, 2018).

However, then US President Barak Obama's pivot to Asia initiative, gradual efforts to limit the number of troops in Iraq and usage of diplomatic means to deal with Iran's nuclear program were seen as indications of the US gradual disengagement in the region. At the same time, the regional balance of power was destabilized after the 2011 Arab Spring resulting in Iran consolidating its political, diplomatic and military prominence in the region. Qatar and the UAE, therefore, saw it as an opportunity to expand its diplomatic and strategic footprint in the region.

### **‘Manufactured’ Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring protests that started in late 2010 and 2011 from Tunisia had engulfed Egypt, Syria and Bahrain. The protests were primarily driven by lack of opportunities, unemployment, and corruption. The demands for dignity soon translated into a revolution against dictatorship and authoritarianism resulting in the toppling of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In Libya, the context of the protests that began in February 2011 was however different from Tunisia and Egypt. While Muammar Gaddafi’s regime was highly authoritarian, the state due to the small size of the population and rich oil and natural gas based economy was largely stable. Domestically, Gaddafi’s regime was based on a system of loyalty through money, alliances, nepotism and influence and barring few opposition figures in the diaspora, there were no major underground opposition groups in Libya to challenge the regime in 2011 (Pedde, 2017, pp. 94-95). There were diplomatic misgivings between Libya and the international community in the past; however, by 2000s Libya managed to normalize ties with the west.

The domestic equation in Libya is characterized by divisions among divergent groups and actors that are based on ideological, national, regional, ethnic and tribal lines. The divisions are rooted in historical differences within the state among the regions of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan; tribal and ethnic tensions stemming from colonial rule and Muammar Gaddafi regime as well as the confrontation between rebels and forces loyal to the regime. Notably, there is an intersection between political and ideological stance and the local context.

On 15 February, Fathi Terbil, an advocate fighting against the atrocities committed by Gaddafi regime in Abu Salem prison in 1996 was arrested in Benghazi. After his arrest, Terbil’s supporters went to the police headquarters and clashed with the police which ignited mass movements spreading from Benghazi to other parts of the state (Human Rights Watch, 2017). It was during this period that Libyans took up arms to form revolutionary brigades that facilitated the formation of militias. The brigades took control from city to city turning the protest into an armed rebellion. The people at this stage lost their sense of fear. The regime’s initial response was slow, however, after the strength of the revolutionary brigades grew, the government forces attempted to reclaim the rebel territories. Gaddafi in a televised address said that he intends to purify Libya. The methods utilized by the regime to retake the territories amplified even more protests and after Gaddafi’s security forces advanced to reclaim the territories, the rebels pushed for external human intervention (Shamoo, 2011).

At the same time, the timing and the process of the armed rebellion indicates a pre-planned effort rather than a spontaneous uprising in terms of availability of a large number of arms and ammunition, coordinated action and planned targets. International media coverage during this period also helped to colour a public perception that intensified

international pressure. The Qatari news channel, Al Jazeera played a crucial role in shaping political and public discourse in the region. The two Gulf States played a major role in shaping international perception towards the events in Libya through media and framed regional policy outcomes on a diplomatic level in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab League forums (Genugten, 2017, pp. 45-46). In the GCC meeting held in Abu Dhabi on 7 March 2011, the ministerial council demanded the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone to protect the rebels from government's bombing squads. They accused Gaddafi of refusing humanitarian aid and claimed that the usage of heavy weaponry and live ammunition against protesting citizens as a violation of human rights and international law (Shaheen, 2011).

On the following day on 8 March 2011, The Secretary General of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu requested UN Security Council (UNSC) to impose a no-fly zone to protect the civilian population (Shaheen, 2011). The demand was reiterated in the Arab League summit in Cairo on 12 March 2011. The resolution was rejected by Syria and Algeria (BBC News, 2011). However, the decision was passed in violation of Article VI of Arab League charter that calls for "unanimous decision to determine the measures necessary to repulse the aggression" (Charter of the League of Arab States, 1945) Notably, Qatar was holding the presidency during the summit.

Earlier, on 22 February 2011, Libya was suspended from the organization and delegation from Gaddafi's regime was not allowed in the Cairo summit. It was the first time that a member state has faced suspension for human rights violations. The Secretary-General of Arab League, Amr Moussa remarked that the no-fly zone should be lifted after the end of the crisis; however, he could not offer clarity on who would impose the no-fly zone. Interestingly, in response to concerns of a few member-states, the organization rejected any foreign military intervention in Libya (Al Jazeera, 2011; BBC News, 2011). The role of Arab League during the course of protests in the region has been highly politicized and the two resolutions on Libya i.e. UNSC imposed a no-fly zone and rejection of foreign intervention appeared to be contradictory to each other. Moreover, the organization remained silent during protests in Tunisia which was largely seen as an internal conflict. It also maintained its policy of non-intervention during the Tahrir Square protests in Cairo. The Arab League Secretary-General, Nabil el-Arabi, in fact, supported the 2013 military coup that ousted Egypt's first democratically elected President, Mohammed Morsi calling it a popular revolution. The organization's stance on protest in Bahrain and Yemen was heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia that feared that regime change in the Persian Gulf could adversely affect its national interest. At the same time, the Arab League saw the protests in Bahrain and Yemen through the lens of proxy wars with Iran (Ibrahim, 2016, pp. 24-26; Mencuttek, 2014, pp. 83-85). The Arab League's positions during this period remained inconsistent, inadequate and were aimed at serving the vested interests of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and its allies.

Eventually, on 17 March 2011, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 to impose a ban on all flights over Libya's airspace and tighten sanctions on the Gaddafi regime. The resolution was passed by 10 votes in favour and five abstentions including India (UN, 2011). The UNSC Resolution 1973 invoked the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) which focused on protection of civilian population who are under attack rather than dismemberment or regime change. However, in the case of Libya, the R2P clause was motivated by strategic interests to topple the Gaddafi regime (Kumar, 2011).

The UAE sent six Mirage fighter jets and six F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter jets to patrol over Libya's airspace. Qatar joined in to conduct air raids to impose a no-fly zone on 25 March 2011 and sent six Mirage fighter jets. Qatar also provided operational training, funding, logistical support, communication equipment and weapons by bypassing the arms embargo (Sambidge, 2011; Keaten and Schreck, 2011).

Two days later on 27 March 2011, Qatar signed an oil contract with the National Transitional Council (NTC) in which Qatar Petroleum agreed to market crude oil from oil fields in eastern Libya which are under the control of the rebels (Al Jazeera, 2011). The NTC was formed by high-ranking defectors and exiled opposition leaders with the stated objective of acting as the political face of the uprising and providing stability and normalcy during the transition period. It was formed in Benghazi on 27 February 2011 and announced itself as the sole representative of Libya on 5 March 2011. On 28 March 2011, Qatar became the first Arab state and the second after France to recognize NTC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people (Al Jazeera, 2011). The UAE recognized NTC as the legitimate government on 12 June 2011 and asked the Gaddafi-appointed Libyan ambassador, Omar El Ghanai to leave the Gulf state within 72 hours (Hamid, 2011). It also became the second Arab state to recognize NTC. The other Arab states accepted NTC as the legitimate government after UN General Assembly accorded recognition to the interim council on 16 September 2011 (Talmon, 2011).

### **Libya's Political Transition and the Role of the Gulf States**

According to NTC, it does not intend to establish government but rather function as an interim organization to guide the state towards a peaceful solution. During its formative period, it announced number of goals based on the demands of the people namely ensuring a fair trial of Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif Al-Gaddafi, conducting free and fair elections, taking over the rest of the state, supporting local organizations that work towards peace, protect its borders, regulate relations with other states, upholding job growth and job security, bring safety and stability and improving cleanliness (NTC, 2019). The Council initially consisted of 33 members which saw a gradual increase during their interim rule. Notably, the identities of several NTC members were kept secret for their protection. The nine prominent members namely Mustafa Mohammed Abdul Jalil, Abdul Hafez Ghoga, Mahmoud Jibril, Omar Al-Hariri, Ahmed Al-Zubair Ahmed Al-Sanusi, Fathi Mohammed

Baja, Fathi Tirbil Salwa, Ali Issawi, Salwa Al-Dighaili assumed the positions of Chair, Vice-chair, executive board head, military affairs, political prisoners issue, political affairs, youth affairs, foreign affairs, women and legal affairs respectively. Interestingly, the head of Foreign Affairs Ali Issawi was serving as Libya's ambassador to India before joining NTC (NTC, 2019).

NTC, however, failed to accommodate the contesting interests of local councils and militias. It could not disarm these groups or completely incorporate them into the state security apparatus. A large number of militias were added into umbrella coalitions such as Libya Shield Forces and the Supreme Security Committee under Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior and put under government payrolls. The decision to grant state salary to any group that fought against the Gaddafi regime led to mushrooming of more armed militias (Arraf, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, membership in militias became a lucrative source of income in the conflict-ridden society. At the same time, the process of integration remained incomplete and the militia groups maintained a high degree of autonomy in Libyan politics.

In the regional level, Qatar assumed the chair of International Contact Group for Libya to coordinate international responses and hosted the first meeting on 13 April 2011. The group was composed of 21 members and representatives from the UN, EU, NATO, OIC, GCC and Arab League. The African Union also attended the summit as an invitee. The goal of the group was to pressurize Gaddafi to relinquish power and halt campaigns in regime occupied areas (NATO, 2011). Abu Dhabi hosted the third summit on 9 June 2011. The response of the participants to arm the opposition was however vague (Voltaire Network, 2011).

Moreover, several civil society members from Libya had strong ties with Qatari and Emirati leadership and were frequent visitors to the Gulf States. Qatar hosted several Muslim Brotherhood members as well as Abdel Hakim Belhadj who later became the head of Tripoli Military Council. Qatar hosted Libyan cleric Ali Al Sallabi and his brother who became part of 17 February Martyrs' Brigade. UAE also hosted NTC Executive Board head Mahmoud Jibril, NTC interim Prime Minister Abdurrahim el-Keib and NTC member Aref Ali Nayed. Nayed was supported by the UAE to lead Tripoli Taskforce and a Libya Stabilization Team and was appointed Libya's ambassador to the UAE between August 2011 and October 2016 (Genugten, 2017, pp. 48-49).

During the course of the armed rebellion against the Gaddafi regime, both states provided arms and equipment by bypassing the UNSC imposed an arms embargo. After Gaddafi's death on 20 October 2011, the Persian Gulf states were keen to maximize their strategic and economic interests to create a conducive atmosphere for trade and investment. It, therefore, focused on providing Libya with logistical support and technical assistance to penetrate in Libya's strategic sectors such as oil and gas, banking and finance, telecommunications, and infrastructure development. To supplement its efforts, the Gulf



States continued to provide funding to a number of militias which could serve their vested interests facilitating in the process of militarization of different groups divided into the lines of tribes, religion, ideology and territory.

In the Libyan political context, NTC handed over power to newly elected General National Congress (GNC) on 8 August 2012. The election for 200 seats General National Congress (Al Mutamar Al Watani Al Aam) was held on 7 July 2012 in which NTC head of executive board, Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA) secured 39 out of 80 seats.<sup>1</sup> Justice and Construction Party belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood secured the second position at 17 seats and 19 smaller parties secured 24 seats. During this election, 80 seats were reserved for political parties under a proportional representation system and 120 seats were allotted for independent candidates under the simple majority system (IPU, 2019). Moreover, 33 women were elected to Congress. The Congress was narrowly divided into the nationalist bloc and Islamist bloc.

The members of the Congress on 9 and 10 August 2012 elected Dr Mohammad Yousef Almagarief as the acting head of state, Juma'a Ahmed Ateega as the First Vice President and Saleh Mohammed Almahzoum as the Second Vice President. NTC chairman Mustafa Mohammed Abdul Jalil stressed that Congress should emphasize on security, disarmament and helping the injured (Temehu, 2019). However, GNC also failed to accommodate these militias or halt state funding. In fact, the government by 2014 was paying salaries of up to 200,000 people involved in numerous militia groups. The trajectory of armed militias during the course of the conflict has been highly fluid as few groups have dissolved and re-grouped into new formulations. Moreover, political parties have aligned with these groups providing the militias, control over the state institutions and parliament. It has therefore weakened government functioning (Arraf, 2017, p. 1). GNC passed the Political Isolation Law on 14 May 2013 to isolate technocrats from the post-Gaddafi political structure who served under the previous regime. It, therefore, led to hollowing out of expertise in state institutions further weakening political and administrative functioning<sup>2</sup> (AL Ahram Weekly, 2013). On 23 December 2013 GNC without public consultation or parliamentary vote announced its decision to extend its term by one more year to monitor the constitution-writing process by the Constitutional Commission and conduct new elections (Markey and Shennib, 2014). This decision by GNC led to nation-wide protests and brought retired General Khalifa Haftar to launch his own challenge to grab power.

Haftar, a retired Libyan soldier participated in the coup d'état against King Idris in 1969. In 1987, Haftar was captured in Chad during Chadian-Libyan conflict. He was later rescued by the US' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and defected from Libyan army. He later formed the military wing of National Front for the Salvation of Libya (LFD) with CIA's help to overthrow Gaddafi. He returned to Libya at the beginning of the uprising in 2011 with an anti-Islamist agenda (BBC News, 2016; Al Jazeera, 2018). After GNC's decision to extend its term for one more year, General Haftar sought to stir a revolt against

1. Mahmoud Jibril was barred from contesting the election as he served in the NTC (IPU, 2019).

2. The Political Isolation Law was revoked by Tobruk based House of Representatives in February 2015 (BBC News, 2015).

it. On 18 May 2014, Zintani Militia allied to General Khalifa Haftar stormed into the parliament and called for suspending GNC and handing over power to the Constitutional Committee. The attackers claimed to remove Islamist hardliners from the Congress (Elumami and Laessing, 2014). However, after his efforts to destabilize GNC failed, he decided to concentrate his efforts and regroup in eastern Libya. Two days earlier on 16 May 2014, Haftar formed the Libyan National Army (LNA) consisting of retired military personnel as well as local militias such as Tripoli Revolutionary Council, Zintani Revolutionaries Military Council, the Qa'qa Brigade, al-Madani Brigade and the Sawa'iqa Brigade and launched Operation Dignity to uproot the presence of Islamist militants from Benghazi (Gomati, 2014). In response to Haftar's military campaign, the Islamist forces established an umbrella group called Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) including Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) and the 17 February Martyrs Brigade. On 13 July 2014, the Islamist coalition launched Operation Libya Dawn to counter Haftar aligned Zintani Brigade in Tripoli and took control of Tripoli International Airport that has been under the control of Al-Qa'qa and Sawa'iq Zintani militias since 2011 on 23 August 2014 (Arraf, 2017, p. 2).

Earlier, on 25 June 2014, election from House of Representatives (HoR) was held in which the nationalist bloc consolidated its power at the expense of the Islamist and Misrata bloc. Unlike the GNC election, all the candidates participated in the polls as independents and election were held under the majority system (IPU, 2019). It was decided that HoR should be based in Benghazi, the epicentre of the 2011 uprising which would also help to rebuilt state authority in the eastern region. Moreover, due to the political consolidation of the nationalist bloc, the shifting of HoR to Benghazi was seen as a transfer of government from west to east and balance of power from one bloc to another. However, on 4 August 2014, the first session was held in Tobruk due to security concerns (Arraf, 2014, pp. 1-3). The weak performance of Islamist and Misrata bloc in HoR along with Haftar's campaign against these groups ignited the civil war. While Haftar and allies claimed these groups as terrorists, the Islamist fighters under the banner of Libya Dawn claimed Haftar as anti-revolutionary and a Gaddafi loyalist.

In this context, former GNC members belonging to the losing Islamist/ Misratan bloc refused to hand over power to HoR as it would imply placing the parliament in Haftar controlled eastern region. Therefore, it effectively split the political institutions in the state in which both sides lacked complete legitimacy and could not deliver services (Chandler, 2015). Crucial technocratic institutions such as National Oil Corporation (NOC) and Central Bank of Libya continued to function under the contracts established under the Gaddafi regime. The bank essentially funded both the governments while neither government enjoyed any control over the bank and oil company.

The tussle between the two governments was further complicated by Supreme Court's verdict on 6 November 2014 to invalidate HoR on procedural grounds. On one

hand, the Islamist bloc in Tripoli based GNC welcomed the verdict and on the other hand, HoR members refused to comply with the court's decision and continued to hold the assembly (BBC News, 2015). HoR in November 2014 endorsed the continuation of Operation Dignity and on 2 March 2015, it appointed Haftar as the chief of staff on the Libyan National Army to carry out the military campaign against militant Islamist groups (Arraf, 2017, p. 2).

The internal struggles for governance in Libya prompted the external powers to support differing sides on the basis of their interests and ideology. The strategic preponderance of the Gulf States was heightened due to the unwillingness of the western powers to deploy a large military presence and invest in political capital to stabilize the state institutions. In the case of UAE and Qatar, the main ideological divide stems from their perception of the role of Political Islam in governance. Qatar along with Turkey, on one hand, perceives Islamist political groups including Muslim Brotherhood as a moderate and popular voice which is likely to prevail in a more democratized Libya and Egypt and it does not present any threat to Gulf monarchies. The UAE along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France and Russia, on the other hand, favours a secular and authoritarian government with religion playing a limited role. The UAE views Islamists as a threat to its pro-business development model and believes that its worldview may hamper the political systems of the Persian Gulf States (Perroux, 2017, p. 3; Genugten, 2017, pp. 51-52). The growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya was also seen through the prism of the potentially destabilizing impact it may have on Egypt.

Egypt is demographically the largest Arab state with one of the most powerful militaries in the Arab world. It, therefore, holds a high priority in the foreign policy of the Gulf States. The election of Mohammad Morsi, from the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was particularly worrisome for the Saudi Arabia and UAE. It was feared that the Morsi government would weaken the US-Saudi-Egypt security triangle and the Muslim Brotherhood's strong anti-Israel posture would escalate tensions in the region that would adversely affect the interests of UAE and Saudi Arabia. Qatar, on the contrary, held a favourable picture of the Muslim Brotherhood. The course of events in Egypt, therefore, coloured their perception on the political transition process in Libya. In this context, the dominance of Islamist bloc in GNC was seen as a threat to the UAE's interests.

At the same time, Haftar's anti-Islamist agenda coincided with the UAE's interests in the region. The differences in approach played a key role in the diplomatic standoff in which UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha on 5 March 2014 (Malek, 2014; Genugten, 2017, pp. 52-53). Moreover, in June 2017, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti and Comoros severed ties with Qatar. The diplomatic standoff coincided with the escalation of political and armed conflict within Libya. On 5 June 2017, the Tobruk based government linked to

HoR complying with the Saudi led sanctions announced the breaking off of diplomatic relations accusing Qatar of supplying funding and arms to Islamist terror groups<sup>3</sup> (Arraf, 2017, p. 3). On a diplomatic level, all international stakeholders including Qatar and UAE have endorsed the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) adopted in Skhirat, Morocco, on 17 September 2015 in order to narrow down the differences between the two governments (UN, 2015). However, the worldview of the external actors on Libya continued to be guided by reserved pragmatism and each state continued to pursue its policy that suited that national objectives.

The UN-backed LPA facilitated the formation of the nine-member Presidency Council (PC) of the Council of Ministers under the Government of National Accord (GNA) that would function as the head of state and Supreme Commander of the Libyan Army. Former HoR member representing Tripoli's Hay Alanduls area Fayeza Mustafa Fouzi Alsarraj was selected as the President of the PC. The GNA called for dissolving the two governments linked to HoR and GNC. However, it decided to integrate the GNC into the consultative High Council of State and HoR would remain as the legitimate parliament (UN, 2015; Arraf, 2017, p. 3).

On 23 December 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2259 validating the PC and urged the international community to recognize the GNA as the only legitimate government to counter the security threats (UN, 2015). The PC after initially operating from Tunis shifted to Tripoli on 30 March 2016. NOC, Central Bank of Libya and several armed groups and municipalities in western Libya accepted the legitimacy of the PC (Amara, 2016). In terms of GNC, while some members agreed to dissolve the GNA and replace it with the High Council of State headed by Abdurrahman Swehli, others sought to reinstate the National Salvation Government under Khalifa al-Ghwell (Pack, Smith and Mezran, 2017, p. 14). The GNC was however rejected by HoR and Haftar as it was perceived that it would lower the powers of Haftar. In 2016, the HoR rejected the list of cabinet members presented by the PC to ratify twice and continued to back the government of Abdullah al-Thinni that operated from Bayda (Pack, Smith and Mezran 2017, p. 32). According to the Thinni government and Haftar, GNA was seen as a mere rebranding of the Islamist bloc and rival militias.

The Islamic State emerged from the chaos of the civil war in 2014. In March 2015, it advanced towards Sirte and seized control. On 15 February 2015, Islamic State (IS) released a video in which 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians were beheaded. Egypt retaliated by launching an air campaign against IS targets in Sirte and Derna on 16 February 2015 that killed 64 IS fighters. HoR and the UAE endorsed the Egyptian campaign and in fact, LNA launched its airstrikes in Derna in coordination with Egyptian Air Force and the UAE (Malsin and Stephen, 2015). The Tripoli-based GNC government, however, opposed the Egyptian campaign and called it an assault against Libya's sovereignty. The military campaign was joined by the US Air Force at the request of GNA. On 5 December 2016,

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3. The GNA however maintained ties with Qatar (Arraf, 2017, p. 3).

head of the PC, Alsarraj announced that Sirte has been reclaimed from IS' control. It was aimed at boosting the authority of GNA. The IS presence in Benghazi decimated by January 2017 (Arraf, 2017, pp. 3-4).

The UAE with regard to Haftar has maintained its firm position that the General must be included in Libya's national leadership. In its efforts at reconciliation, Abu Dhabi hosted a meeting between Serraj and Haftar on 2 May 2017 in which both sides held preliminary discussions on amending the LPA (Khan, 2017). However, reconciliation did not occur and fighting among rival militias and rival governments continued in 2017.

Haftar on 17 December 2017 remarked that the mandate of GNA had expired and he nullified the institutions under the UN-backed government (Al Jazeera, 2017). On 29 May 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron also sought to reconcile between the rival governments held a discussion with Prime Minister Fayez Al Serraj, Speaker of the House of Representatives Agila Saleh Essa Gwaider, President of the High Council of State Khaled al-Mishri and General Khalifa Haftar and decided to hold an election in December 2018 (Wintour, 2018). However, due to the continuing conflict between the rival governments, the elections were postponed.

### **Battle over Control of Oil**

The continuing lack of reconciliation among the two rival governments based in Tripoli and Tobruk has led to a division in oil infrastructure with oil terminals under the control of competing government factions and militias. The NOC has legal control over Libya's oil resources and exports. During the course of the conflict, it remained neutral and its control over oil exports was hampered by the presence of rival NOC East based in Benghazi since 2014. The NOC East attempted to gain international recognition and made efforts to sign exploitation contracts with foreign firms. In April 2016, a dispute erupted between the rival NOCs which led to a three-week-long blockade of Marsa el-Hariga port that sank the oil production to 200,000 barrels per day (Global Risks Insights, 2018). In July 2016, the rival NOCs agreed on a deal to unify the oil sector (George and Ghaddar, 2016). Both factions of NOC agreed that the head of Tripoli-based NOC, Mustafa Sanalla would assume the chair and head of NOC East Naji al-Maghrabi would become a board member.

In July 2016, the PC signed an agreement with Ibrahim Jadhran, the former head of Petroleum Facilities Guard for Central Libya to reopen the oil terminals in Sidrah and Ra's Lanuf which were under Jadhran's control since 2013 blocking sales of approximately US\$ 5 billion. The Tripoli-based GNC failed to retake control of the oil terminals which provided an opportunity for the LNA under Haftar to capture oil ports in Sidrah, Ra's Lanuf, Burayqah and resumed oil supply by integrating the NOC (Arraf, 2017, p. 2). On 24 January 2017, the NOC Chairman Mustafa Sanalla lifted the self-imposed moratorium on foreign investment in the oil sector which resulted in an increase in production to 1 million barrel per day in July 2017 (Euro Petrole, 2017). The oil terminals of Ra's Lanuf and Sidrah were

recaptured by Jadhran with help from Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB) on 14 June 2018. However, Jadhran's attempts were thwarted by Haftar with UAE's help who managed to capture it on 21 June 2018. (Warfalli and Ghaddar, 2018). However, after LNA took control, it decided to hand over control to NOC East that maintained its presence in Benghazi despite the 2016 reunification. However, due to international pressure, Haftar conceded and handed over the oil terminals to Tripoli-based NOC on 11 July 2018 (Global Risk Insights, 2018; Warfalli and Lewis, 2018). However, the conflict over control of oil ports and terminals has continued. Recently on 11 February 2019, Haftar's Touareg allies expanded control by taking over Libya's largest oil field, El Sharara which was taken over by tribal groups, armed protesters and state guards since 8 December 2018 who were demanding payment of salaries and development funds (The Libya Observer, 2019). The strategic consolidation of major oil fields by Haftar is seen as a welcome change by UAE and international investments in Libya's petroleum sector has been on the rise. The tussle over control of oil within Libya can also be seen through the lens of regional competition between UAE and Qatar to control Libyan oil market and stir the international oil price during this period.

## **Conclusion**

The conflict in Libya is multi-dimensional in which internal and external factors have shaped the trajectory of the changes occurring presently. The domestic politics in post-Gaddafi Libya reflected a tinker box of conflicting blocs based on ideology, religion, tribes etc. The 2011 Arab Spring wave in Libya was unique as the protest against the regime was manufactured with the help of external actors. The protests against the regime soon transformed into an armed rebellion in which militias with enormous amounts of weapons and funding took control over the fragmented state. In this context, the study on the role of external actors especially Qatar and UAE are crucial to dissect the Libyan puzzle and how it inflamed the protests and subsequently led to the balkanization of the state.

The two Gulf States played a central role in mobilizing efforts at toppling Gaddafi. However, their strategy bifurcated due to the internal contradictions in Libya's political structure. The power vacuum that emerged after Gaddafi's fall led political blocs stemming from secular nationalist and Islamist ideologies. It was further complicated by the presence of well-funded militias that controlled patches of territories throughout the state. From Qatar's perspective, it viewed the presence of Islamists in Libya's political milieu as natural which is likely to broaden in a more democratized Libya. The UAE, however, viewed the Islamists as a threat to Libya's politics and regional stability. The differences in perceptions with regard to the presence of Islamists led both sides to support opposing camps. The rivalry funded and diplomatically supported by the Gulf states has played a crucial role in widening the cleavage within Libya resulting in the continuation of two rival governments based in Tripoli in the west and Tobruk in the east. The mutual suspicion and rivalry have permeated into the numerous militia groups that have allied with each government.

Moreover, the regional power play in which Qatar has been diplomatically shunned by UAE and Saudi Arabia has also impacted the political situation in Libya.

Presently, the UN-backed and internationally recognized government in Tripoli has continued, however, the Tobruk based government supported by General Khalifa Haftar is entrenching its presence by taking of territories and more importantly the prized oil facilities. To conclude, the goal of political solution between the competing governments is contingent on UAE and Qatar's strategic rivalry and their political choices which remain bleak in the near future.

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