

Libyan commander backed by Russia says he's ready for negotiations to end the war



The New York Times

Photo above: Celebrating with Libyan national flags in Tripoli on Friday after fighters loyal to the UN-backed government captured the city of Tarhuna from rival forces loyal to Commander Khalifa Hifter.

"Libya: One of the proxy wars between the United States and Russia, for the Spheres of Influence.

2011 -> The Arab Spring begins a civil war, which creates one of the greatest humanitarian crises in the world.

2014 -> Read the first article to see how this civil war turned into 2014.

2019 -> The first article shows the new Russian impulse, with some success, from September 2019 (the history of Raphia).

2020 -> Read the second article to see the most recent Libya: One of the proxy wars fought between the United States and Russia, by spheres of influence".

Élder Tess

Second article:

De Declan Walsh

June 06, 2020

CAIRO - The Libyan commander backed by Russia, whose forces have suffered a series of losses on the battlefield in recent days, declared on Saturday that he was ready to stop fighting and begin negotiations to end the civil war in his oil-rich country.

The announcement is unlikely to bring an immediate end to the fighting. But it offered new evidence of Turkey's decisive influence on the other side of the Libyan war, whose intervention on behalf of the UN-backed government in Tripoli frustrated Russia's ambitions and changed the course of the conflict.

Libyan commander Khalifa Hifter made the ceasefire offer in Cairo, alongside his Egyptian ally, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Egypt, along with Russia and the United Arab Emirates, have invested heavily in supporting Hifter and are now trying to limit their losses after the dramatic collapse of their 14-month campaign to capture Tripoli.

The scale and speed of Hifter's losses surprised the Libyans, and analysts say the retreat not only marks the end of his attack on Tripoli, but will likely reshape the country's broader military and political landscape.

"All our arguments are changing," said Tarek Megerisi, an analyst with the European Council of Foreign Affairs. "It's not very clear what things will be like once the dust settles. But this is Hifter on the ropes. It's the first time we've seen him make any compromises or concessions since he returned to Libya in 2014. "

Libya, which has the largest oil reserves in Africa, has been plunged into chaos since the fall of its long-time dictator, Colonel Muammar el-Kaddafi, by a US-backed coalition during the Arab Spring in 2011. An eruption of fighting between Libyan factions in 2014 quickly turned into a regional proxy war, fuelled by foreign powers that poured weapons, money and mercenaries into the struggle.

Over the years, the country split between east and west, with Hifter based in his eastern fortress in the city of Benghazi. The UN-backed government is based in Tripoli in the west.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent a warship, armed drones and thousands of Syrian fighters, funded by Turkey, in January to delay Hifter's attack on Tripoli. The forces supported by Turkey have achieved a series of great victories in recent days, guiding Hifter's forces entirely west of Libya and taking them hundreds of miles east.

After capturing Tripoli's international airport earlier this week, government fighters captured Tarhuna, Hifter's last fortress in western Libya, on Friday. Fleeing fighters left behind helicopters, expensive weapon systems made in Russia, and large munitions stores.



A billboard representing Mr. Hifter at his Benghazi fortress.

On Saturday night, government forces had reached the outskirts of Surt, 230 miles east of Tripoli, where heavy fighting broke out. Government fighters were hit by air strikes from drones and warplanes. At least 19 government fighters were killed, according to reports from Libya.

In the south, oil production resumed at the giant Sharara oil field after Hifter's forces abandoned it, Reuters reported.

The main issue now, said Wolfram Lacher, an analyst with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, "is what the Russians will do.

Hundreds of Russian mercenaries employed by Wagner Group, a private military company linked to the Kremlin that played a critical role in the Tripoli offensive, retreated to the relative safety of a Hifter-controlled air base.

The Russians could use their air power to prevent the government's advance from reaching a crescent-shaped stretch of

coastline that is the center of Libya's oil industry and currently controlled by Hifter.

Another possibility, Lacher said, is that the supposed ceasefire announced in Cairo could be a pretext for Egyptian air strikes or other military actions in support of Hifter next week.

"I see this as a warning to government forces that Egypt will apply red lines if they don't stop the advance," he said. "The Egyptians would like to keep the growing oil under Hifter's control."

Developments on the battlefield mark a dramatic turnaround for Hifter, 76, a former CIA asset.

Since launching his first offensive in 2014, Hifter has developed a reputation as a truculent, iron-fisted commander who despised politics, played his foreign allies against each other, and regularly boasted of his intention to take power by force.

But he cut a punished figure in Cairo on Saturday while humbly standing beside el-Sisi, proposing the implementation of a ceasefire that would begin on Monday morning.



From the left, Aguilah Saleh, president of the Libyan parliament, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt and Hifter, arriving at a press conference in Cairo on Saturday.

In his comments, Hifter criticised what he called "Turkish settlers" and called for all foreign fighters and arms supplied by foreigners to be sent out of Libya - an impressive call, given the intensity with which Hifter relies on foreign arms, men and money to mount his doomed attack on Tripoli.

His attack on Tripoli was going well, with the help of Russia, until January, when Turkey intervened to save the sick government of Tripoli. Erdogan got into the fight for a mixture of commercial and geostrategic reasons.

Before agreeing to send his armed forces, he signed an agreement with the government of Tripoli to grant him more rights in the eastern Mediterranean, a natural gas exploration center. But the Libyan war also offered him a chance to return against his great regional rival, the United Arab Emirates.

The impact was felt in a matter of months.

Turkish officials were sent to Libya to impose order on disciplined government forces, while Syrian fighters, reinforced by battle, reinforced front lines in the suburbs south of Tripoli. Turkish drones attacked the Hifter supply lines and, on one day in late May, destroyed several Russian air defence systems financed by the Emirates.

Analysts say Turkey and Russia are likely to avoid direct clashes between their forces in Libya and still be able to make a deal on Libya.

Another possibility is that Hifter will face a challenge at his base in eastern Libya, where he has kept rivals relentless for years.

"There are so many forces and actors," Lacher said. "Some Hifter supporters may have an opportunity to improve their position. Others have been alienated or exiled outside eastern Libya and may have a chance to get back at him. It's a pretty combustible mixture.

The main factor in keeping these forces under control, he added, "is the fear of instability that would come with Hifter's death.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/world/middleeast/libya-hifter.html?referringSource=articleShare>