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GHEDDAFI'S GHOST

In Libya today there is much talk about an agreement between the various armed and political factions that gained recognition in the Libyan civil war and in the ousting of Gheddafi. On the other hand, those that supported the defunct Libyan dictator, like the Kabiles or tribes that sided with him and that were subsequently persecuted and marginalized, are being kept away from the negotiating table. The winners are sitting discussing the pacification of the country while the losers are being kept at bay.

Surely in today's Libya there is scarce social empathy for Gheddafi's supporters. The main players in his regime – those that were more compromised – escaped abroad. Most of them fled to Egypt, Malta, or to the Gulf countries. Some betrayed and sided with the revolution. The more unfortunate ones were apprehended and are now sitting in the Tripoli tribunal waiting to be sentenced, as many Libyans would hope, to death.

On the surface, it would seem that former Gheddafi supporters have lost their influence in the country's workings. But the truth is that the social chaos caused by the 2011 revolution has made many Libyans reconsider the living conditions during Gheddafi's regime. Perhaps it wasn't so bad after all, they think: there was no terrorism, there was a State, social services and security were guaranteed at all times.

Gheddafi managed to control a large country such as Libya through a series of alliances, donations and persecutions, with and against the local tribes. It was an efficient form of government, seen that there are over 140 tribes and clans in Libya. Gheddafi was helped by the fact that his tribe (the Qadadfa) were originally from Sirte, a city that is located between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the two most important regional entities in Libya. Things were different back then. The chieftains and/or elders had the power to influence the choices of their group; they had a voice in the current social, political events and were the interface between the people and the regime. Today, the civil war has smashed this fragile social equilibrium into bits and handed power to the militias.

This condition causes frustration and a desire for revenge in the supporters of the former dictator. And there are rumors that some of them are reorganizing their ranks.

Gheddafi's family

The most prestigious person among Gheddafi's former entourage is his son Seif al Islam, who is currently "detained" by the militias of Zintan, allies of General Haftar, the head of the so-called "Libyan National Army" of Cyrenaica.

The Zintan militias captured Seif in November 2011 as he was fleeing from Libya to Niger and refused to hand him over to the Tripoli authorities to be tried (he was sentenced to death in absentia on July 28, 2015). The Zintan militias also refused to transfer Seif to the International Criminal Court, which had requested his extradition to try him for crimes against humanity. Instead, Zintan decided to try Seif on their own.

Although the news hasn't been officiated or publicized, Seif is no longer detained since last July. He currently lives in Zintan where he is officially free to move, use his telephone and where he is allegedly knitting his network and taking care of his business.

The act of mercy by the Zintan authorities was juridically connected to the amnesty proclaimed in Tobruk at the end of Ramadan, although the provision was not supposed to effect the status of people accused of war crimes. But there is, of course, a political and practical reason behind Zintan's decision to free Saif.

There is a strong component of former Gheddafi supporters in the ranks of General Haftar's organization and, since many of them live in Egypt, they are able to operate as a lobby with the Cairo authorities to raise support for the General. Haftar himself was one of Gheddafi's men and shared his authoritarian approach and discretionary brutality while administering power. Haftar later got into a collision course with Gheddafi and sided with the opposition, but the two were in tune both politically and culturally.

In more practical terms, to have a Gheddafi on your side allows you to have the Kabiles that supported Gheddafi and are now marginalized on your side as well. Among these tribes we find the Warfalla, one of the biggest tribes in the country. They are very numerous in Benghazi, where Haftar reigns, in Bani Walid and in Sirte. And there are also the Qadadfa and the Maghara, another very important tribe (mostly present in the oil-producing areas) that counts among its members Gheddafi's brother-in-law Abdalla Senussi (now on trial in Tripoli). Then there is the Barasa of Al Baida, that see Gheddafi's second wife and mother of Seif among its members. In short, to have the loyalists of the old dictator on your side is nothing short of a good move.

Presently, the remainder of Gheddafi's family lives in Oman. This includes his widow Safiah, his first son Mohammed (from the previous wedding), who neither cared for politics nor had a role in the dictatorship, and his only daughter Aysha, who harbors a desire for revenge against the people who killed her father.

Of the remaining sons there is the aforementioned Seif, who lives in Zintan, his brother Saadi, who was extradited from Niger and is on trial in Tripoli, and the other brother, Hannibal, who is currently detained in Lebanon. Of these three, Seif is the one with the most prestige because he is the first male son (of Gheddafi's second wife), was the dictator's designated heir and (this part is often forgotten) was supposed to introduce more social freedom in the country. As for Saadi and Hannibal, they are mostly famous for extra-political happenings: the former for his soccer ambitions (partly satisfied in Italy) and the latter for his excesses (he was caught speeding with a Ferrari in France; he was accused of violence against his servants and wife in Switzerland, which caused a diplomatic incident at the time).

Seif's role

Seif's plan to begin liberalizing Libya was obstructed by foreign military intervention and by the subsequent civil war, during which Gheddafi's son was forced to assume a military role, something he had never done in the past. In virtue of this, he was later accused of crimes against humanity; his file was presented to the International Criminal Court by the Libyan authorities. If, on the one hand, Seif Al Islam cannot be blamed for the crimes of his father's regime, on the other his last name is still too cumbersome. This makes his involvement in the mediation between the loyalists and the new political system highly unlikely.

The revenge of the loyalists

Many of Gheddafi's former supporters are just waiting for revenge and some even consider the possibility of yet another coup to regain power. But today's Libya is too busy with the clash between Serraj's Government of National Accord, the government and parliament in Tripoli and that in Tobruk. The Misurata militia defends Serraj, the Libyan National Army sides with Tobruk and the Libyan National Guard supports Tripoli's Islamic government. No one really mentions the militias that are loyal to the Libyan clans and tribes. The very same militias that could one day side with the former Gheddafi supporters. After all, the people that governed alongside Gheddafi made a lot of money and are willing to spend it now: meaning more arms, more soldiers, more mercenaries.

In today's Libya there exists neither real politics nor cult of democracy. But to be frank, these two elements have never actually surfaced since the country's independence in 1951. In fact, Prime Minister Serraj's national reconciliation's success or failure is directly proportional with the amount of deterrence that his military force (in this case the Misurata militia and the Presidential Guard) can exert on his opponents.

In the North-African context, the potential restoration of a regime that is associated with the preceding dictatorship could be acceptable for most. The first thing that Libya's neighbors would like is for the country to have a central State again. The current Libyan situation creates instability, which fuels Islamic terrorism, which is a danger for all. But the second thing they would like is that the new leader of Libya be favorable to their interests. Gheddafi's Libya – although with ups and downs – had good relationships with Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia. Although Gheddafi's theatrical behavior was hard to deal with, in the end what kept everyone together was the common origin of their power; the military coup.

The diaspora of loyalists is very active today. They began reorganizing in 2012 and can now count on roughly 20.000 exiles abroad and as many in Libya. The rallying cry is 'rebuild the Jamahiriya'. Seif's image of a moderate man that tried to make his father's dictatorship more democratic could be useful to the cause. On top of that, Seif can also count on the rivalry between Cyrenaica and Tropolitania that only a man of the Fezzan could overcome. Lastly, there is the social chaos that fuels nostalgic memories of the old days.

Indeed, there are various organizations that are trying to rebuild the Jamahariyah. The first is a political group that was founded in exile in February 2012, on the anniversary of the civil war. It is called the “National Popular Movement”. The party was founded by former members of the regime and is headed by Kweldi al Humeidi, one of the participants in the 1969 coup and a member of the Revolutionary Council (also related to Gheddafi, since his daughter married Saadi). The movement was, of course, denied participation in the Libyan elections. But the structure exists, it is active on the web and connected to the so-called “Green Resistance” (from the color of the Jamahariyah flag). In 2012 there were also rumors of a militia composed of former Gheddafi loyalists named “Brigade of the faithful” (“Katibah al Awfiyah”) that was allegedly active in the suburbs of Tripoli.

While Seif was being sentenced to death in absentia in August 2015 by the Tripoli tribunal, there were a series of demonstrations organized by former Gheddafi supporters in Benghazi, Tobruk, Sebha and Bani Walid where people waved Jamahariyah flags. During the same year the self-proclaimed “Supreme Council of Libyan Tribes” (comprised of the tribes that were loyal to Gheddafi) designated Seif as the sole legitimate representative of the country. One of Gheddafi’s former commanders in the south, Ali Kana, also proclaimed the constitution of an army in the Fezzan.

Are these just boisterous words of nostalgic former regime members who would like to turn back the hands of time?

Perhaps not, seen that the UN also felt the need to invite and hear, in 2015, the representatives of the old regime to find a solution to the Libyan crisis. Nor can we ignore more recent signs that Gheddafi is still appealing: his loyalists fought – last year – with Haftar’s militia against the ISIS and last December two of them hijacked an airplane to Malta in order to publicize the marginalization of the Colonel’s former supporters. The surrendered hijackers walked out of the plane with a Jamahariyah flag held up high.

RUSSIA'S HANDS ON THE MIDDLE EAST

Russia is the only superpower currently capable of influencing events in the Middle East. Moscow's rise was a direct consequence of Washington's retreat from direct military involvement in the region. During his 8 years at the White House, US President Barack Obama's priority has been an exit strategy from the thorny mess he had inherited from George W. Bush. However, this has paved the way for Russia's rise in the Middle East.

Regardless of the international sanctions that followed events in Crimea and Ukraine, in 2015 Moscow decided to intervene in support of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and rescued him from what seemed an inevitable military defeat. A game-changing intervention that now has everyone look up to Russia for a solution out of the Syrian quagmire. It is Vladimir Putin that decides who can sit around a negotiations table in Astana. It is for Moscow to decide which Islamic factions to invite, whether Erdogan's Turkey or Rouhani's Iran can participate and relegate the US, the British and the French to mere observers. And it is once again Putin that has decided to exclude the US-backed Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces to appease Ankara. And yes, does anyone remember the UN? Guess what, they're basically irrelevant.

Russia has managed to achieve what the US failed to do. The Middle East is not interested in democratic principles, but on stability achieved through the show of force. Moscow has proven to be willing to exercise its might and this has been appreciated across the entire region.

The Persian Gulf countries

The Gulf countries have always been traditional US allies. However, when they perceived the US retreat as a threat to their stability, they got closer to Russia. Even Saudi Arabia went as far as reaching a deal on oil prices with Moscow at the G20 meeting in Hangzhou, in China, in September 2016. What the Saudis fear the most in Russia's favorable stance towards Iran, the Shia and, as a consequence, the Tehran-backed Houthi rebellion in Yemen. The house of Saud is concerned about a Shia sphere of influence stretching from Lebanon to Iran, and which includes Syria and Iraq. The only way out of this nightmare is a deal with Moscow and a close relationship with Turkey. Riyadh and Ankara both share an enmity against the Shia, although they have different views when the Muslim Brotherhood is brought up.

Iran

Russia and Iran are presently allied in support of Assad's regime and in fighting Islamic terrorism in Syria and Iraq. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's terrorists are Sunni, and this is the basis of the strange military alliance between Moscow and Tehran. Shia volunteers are fighting both in Syria and Iraq, while Iranian Pasdarans and Lebanese Hezbollah are helping Assad out. Since August 2016, the Iranians have granted Russian fighter jets the use of the Hamadan airbase for their interventions in Syria.

The axis has been favored by the election of a moderate president like Hassan Rouhani in Iran. He was able to overcome religious incompatibilities and improve economic ties. Since

the end of the embargo, Iran has increasingly purchased Russian weapons, including the S300 long range surface-to-air missiles, and has seen trade increase by 80% in 2016. From 1.4 billion dollars in 2014, exchanges have reached 10 billion last year. Bilateral deals have also been signed in the financial sector, including banking and the use of national currencies. The Russians will also provide assistance in offshore drilling, as Gazprom and the Iranian Central Oil Field Company have signed two exploration agreements at the end of 2015. Iran might also join Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

The Russo-Iranian partnership is hence political, military and economic. Such a broad relationship is part of a long term strategy. Donald Trump's election and his critical stance towards the deal on the Iranian nuclear program could provide another boost to the ties between Moscow and Tehran.

Turkey

Until a few months ago, Turkey was hostile to the Syrian regime and supported the armed opposition trying to topple Assad. By doing so, they had colluded with ISIS and gone as far as downing a Russian jet. Now, in an unprecedented twist of events, Turkey is once again at peace with Russia and is not against Assad staying in power anymore. What is more important for Vladimir Putin is not Erdogan per se, but the fact that Turkey is the biggest army in the region and a "rogue" NATO member. On the other hand, the Ottos want to prevent any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, and this can only be avoided by dealing with the Russians. If this means Assad will have to stay in power, the Turks will simply have to bite the bullet.

Egypt

Russia was very close to Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 60s, and this is one of the reasons why the Egyptian president was toppled in 1970 and Cairo fell under the US sphere of influence. When the Arab Spring came about and Mohamed Morsi rose to power with the tacit approval of the United States, the Russian sat and waited. Their patience paid off when Abdel Fattah al Sisi ousted Morsi and a renewed phase opened in the relationship with the Russians.

Moscow is playing the Egyptian card in Libya, where both countries support general Khalifa Haftar, and in Syria, where Cairo has been invited to take part in the Astana round of negotiations. Egypt was, together with Russia, one of the countries that voted against a French-backed UN Security Council resolution critical of Bashar al Assad. At the same time, Egypt re-opened its embassy in Damascus.

To seal the renewed collaboration, joint military exercises that involved 15 Russian fighter jets and helicopters and 600 troops were held on Egyptian soil in October 2016. The last time Russians carried out a joint military exercise with the Egyptians was in 1972. After that the Russian military advisors were kicked out by then President Anwar Sadat.

Egypt plays a key role in Putin's strategy. It's the Middle East's most populated country, it has a strong military willing to get involved in neighboring Libya, it controls the Suez canal

and could, as in the past, concede its military bases to Moscow. To this effect, ongoing negotiations involve the possibility of re-opening the Sidi Barrani military base to Russian troops. After all, both countries share a common enemy: Islamic terrorism. Egypt fights it off in the Sinai, Russia in Syria.

The two countries have also strengthened their economic ties: Egypt has joined the Eurasian Economic Union, a series of bilateral deals have been signed and transactions are carried out using the Egyptian pound to the detriment of the US dollar. Although Egypt remains, after Israel, the biggest recipient of US aid, the Russians will continue to gain ground.

Israel

Russia's military intervention in Syria has brought Moscow and Tel Aviv closer. The two countries have a direct line of communication to prevent incidents over Syrian airspace. When Israeli fighters strike against the Hezbollah, they do so with Russian consent. While Israel might not like the axis between Russia and Iran, it also wants to continue operating beyond its borders. And the only way to do so is to talk to the Russians, the region's new powerbroker.

Like several of its neighbors, Tel Aviv would rather have Assad in power than hand Syria over to Islamic terror. And once the Syrian crisis is over, the Palestinian issue will resurface and Russia will have to be part of the solution. Moscow has traditionally sided with the Palestinians, although the Kremlin will not antagonize the Israelis as part of their strategy to affect the US influence in the region. Israel and Russia might find a common ground to collaborate, as Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Moscow in March 2017 shows.

Libya

Russia has openly stepped in in Libya alongside Egypt and in support of General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar is considered the strongman in the current Libyan scenario. This pits, at least in theory, Russia against the UN Security Council's decision to side with PM Fayez al Sarraj. And while Moscow is ready to support Haftar on the ground, al Sarraj met with Russian officials. Once again, Russia is keeping all options open and has cast its eyes on a potential naval base in the Mediterranean. After all, Russia abstained from voting the UN-backed military intervention in Libya in 2011. Moscow can claim to have played no role in the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi and in the mayhem that followed.

Vladimir Putin's role

Putin realized that a military intervention in Syrian would fill the political and military void left by the US. Although Trump and Putin can probably get along, Russia will never give up the strategic role it has gained in the Middle East. After all, Trump abeled as a "mistake" the US military intervention in Iraq and Libya and has pointed to Russia as its main ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin both share a good dose of pragmatism when dealing with international affairs, and they're both nationalists. While Trump thinks about America First, Putin is more interested in renewing Russian

imperialism. The former KGB operative is a nostalgic of the Soviet Union, while it is unclear what Trump wants from the US role in the world.

Vladimir Putin's support of the Syrian regime has triggered a series of political and military gains. Russia's shrewd politics protects Assad and talks with Turkey; is allied to Iran, but maintains good ties with Saudi Arabia; supports the Palestinians while dealing with Israel; is in favor of Egypt without alienating both the Saudis and the Turks; it doesn't fight against the US-backed Syrian Kurds, but leaves them out of the Astana peace talks; sides with the Iranian Shia without fueling the unrest in Sunni-led Gulf countries. The end result of this political balancing act is Russia's key role in the Middle East. A success story, until now.

THE NEXT STOP IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SUNNI AND SHIA: BAHRAIN

The struggle for hegemony between Iran and Saudi Arabia is fueled by the Sunni-Shia divide. The religious conflict between the two main branches of Islam is fought by proxies. Among the different sources of instability in the Middle East, this is probably the most dangerous one. This is because Sunni and Shia Muslims cohabit in the same countries and feel the burden of this looming conflict.

Although not in the spotlight, the most blatant example is Bahrain. Despite being a small country, it's social, political and religious landscape sums up all the contradictions and instability currently afflicting the Arabic peninsula: a Sunni minority ruling over a Shia majority (around 70% of the population), a despotic regime that survives thanks to the support of neighboring countries, a total absence of democratic participation, a systematic violation of human rights. This makes of Bahrain the umpteenth example in the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It is not a coincidence that a Shia opponent based in Iran, Murtaza Sindi, has announced the start of an armed struggle last January. The message came after three Shia accused of having carried out a terrorist attack that killed three policemen in 2014 were put to death. Now that the main Shia party in Bahrain, al-Wefaq, has been disbanded, the winds of war are blowing over a precarious domestic situation and point to a new phase in the confrontation between Tehran and Ryad.

The crushing of a Spring

The regime led by Emir Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa saw a number of popular protests erupt during the Arab Spring. On February 12, 2011 a peaceful protest asking for democracy and more power for the Shia majority began. A month later, Saudi troops and policemen coming from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council crushed the protests. The 13 thousand men from the Bahraini defense forces, armed and trained by the US, were not enough to contain the revolution. Over a hundred people died, thousands were arrested to defend the reign of the al Khalifas.

The emirate still survives thanks to the oppression carried out by its security forces and outside help. In addition, the US, who have a huge military base on the island, and the UK, responsible for training and supporting the armed forces and looking forward to opening a base in the harbor of Mina Salman, are both silent.

The spiritual leader of the Shia community, ayatollah Isa Qassim, an 80 year-old man that studied in Najaf, Iraq, was stripped by government of his Bahraini nationality in June 2016 soon after al-Wefaq was banned. The official motivation is: promotion of sectarianism and violence, foreign influence (i.e. Iran), and illegal funding and money laundering. Qassim is currently on trial for these "crimes" alongside two of his aides.

Following the 2011 protests, the Secretary general of al-Wefaq, Ali Salman, was also convicted to 4 years behind bars in 2015 for "incitement to hate, public nuisance and insult to public institutions". His sentence was increased to 9 years following his appeal. Salman was exiled by the regime in 1994 after pro-democracy demonstrations in the early 1990s,

he benefited from an amnesty and returned home in 2001, where he was abused and tortured by the Bahraini security forces.

A repressive regime

The role of the internal and external opposition in Bahrain is just the tip of the iceberg of Shia dissent and the systematic repression carried out by the regime's security forces that usually follows. The indiscriminate arrest of Shia religious leaders and politicians is the norm. And so is the recourse to torture, the shutting down of non-aligned newspapers and TV stations, the accusations of subversive activities for anyone taking the streets to protest. Since January 2017, the National Security Agency, the domestic intelligence agency that is trained and supported by the British MI-6, has been granted the authority to arrest Bahrainis "only" in cases of terrorism. It comes as no surprise that any protest in Manama is considered an act of terrorism.

Democracy has never dictated the course of events in Bahrain. Since independence in 1971, the Minister of Interior has always been the same: Khalifa bin Salman al Khalifa, the uncle of the present-day ruler. As in most neighboring countries, power in Bahrain has been a family affair for the past two centuries or so. Of course, at least on paper, Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy. The truth is it's an absolute one. There formally is a Council of Representatives, a lower house, elected by the people and a Consultative Council, the upper house, appointed by the ruling family. However, the elected members of the assembly have no legislative power. This means that no decision, from the judiciary to security, is taken without the consent of the ruler. Iranian influence has only made things worse and pushed the emir to seek aid from Saudi Wahabis and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Shia terrorism

The threats coming from Murtaza Sindi have to be taken seriously because they are part of Iran's expanding influence. Several Shia militias and volunteers are fighting across the region and they might want to keep on going after ISIS is defeated. In other words, once the Sunni terrorism of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is taken out, we could witness the rise of Shia terrorism.

The Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi People's Mobilization Forces, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the Hazara Shia volunteers coming from Afghanistan might look for new battlegrounds once the so-called Islamic State is overrun. Rumors has it that the Bahraini opposition is being trained by Shia militias. Others point to a group named "Hezbollah from Bahrain".

After the conquest of Aleppo in December 2016, Iranian General Hossein Salami, the deputy head of the Revolutionary Guards, stated that the next military targets are Yemen and Bahrain. General Qassem Suleiman, the chief of the elite Al Quds forces and the man commanding Iranian troops in Syria and Iraq, expressed the same concept in June 2016. Suleiman, who usually doesn't talk much, said that the Bahraini opposition might take up arms and that Iran is ready to support them. He also mentioned a bloody intifada in the reign in the near future.

Fire under the ashes

The reign of the al Khalifas survives despite social unrest, jails filled with opposition members (over 3 thousand people, including some minors), the sealing off and military control of Shia villages, the influx of foreigners – especially Sunni Arabs – to dilute the Shia demographics, the transfer of foreign aid from the Gulf countries only to the Sunni minority, while leaving the Shias in despair. Local courts are overwhelmed and dissent is punished with no less than five years of imprisonment, the stripping of nationality and torture are also very common. But the international community pays no attention.

Bahrain's ruler can still count on anglo-american support and on his neighbors in the Persian Gulf. After all, Bahrain doesn't have oil of its own and has its main source of income from a Saudi well it is allowed to sell. His neighbors know that a Shia upheaval could have a domino effect, especially in Saudi Arabia where the Shia minority is concentrated in the oil producing region known as the Eastern Province.

Sunni and Shia have a hard time living together in Bahrain; mixed marriages are at their lowest and the two communities don't live together anymore. And this is extremely dangerous. While the nascent Arab spring was suffocated in the cradle, the revolution still burns under the ashes and could, sooner or later, re-ignite.