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MACRON'S LIBYA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

One wonders whether the July 25 meeting in France between president Serraj and general Haftar can effectively unlock the political-military situation in Libya.

Surely, as in all other diplomatic initiatives, that of the new French president Macron can contribute to the national reconciliation in Libya. However, its hasty nature seems to answer to a logic that is different from the objective that was officially declared.

The problems of the French initiative

The first problem is the unilateralism of the diplomatic initiative, which should have received prior coordination from the UN (its new representative, Libyan national Ghassam Salamé, who is notoriously pro-French, was sent on the scene but ended up playing a subordinate role. In addition, Salamé had not yet visited Tripoli as an official envoy of the UN). More coordination among European nations would have also been helpful, especially in the case of Italy, seen the problem of illegal immigration from Libya to the Italian peninsula. These elements give rise to doubts that Macron's initiative is actually aimed at fueling French 'grandeur' and the country's interventionist policy in Africa. Macron was in the midst of a crisis with the French military establishment and needed to bring into the national spotlight an issue that would heighten French national pride internationally.

The second problem is in the substance of the Paris accord. It supposedly puts an end to armed fighting (except for the fight against terror), dismantles armed militias and ferries the country to presidential and parliamentary elections within the coming Spring. These objectives would be hard to achieve even if the only two parties in the Libyan social chaos were Serraj and Haftar. But the country is filled with armed militias whose disarmament is highly unlikely, there is an Islamic government in Tripoli that has no intention of receding (they are tagged 'terrorists' by Haftar himself) and there is a harsh rivalry between the Misurata militias that back Serraj and those of Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army. Despite the international support he receives, Serraj has little power over his people, while Haftar tends to divide the country. Also, to think of holding elections in the Spring of 2018 in a country that is slowly disintegrating is hazardous to say the least. Whoever will decide to run for elections in Libya will want to do so from a position of military strength rather than through popular consensus. Neither Libya's nor Haftar's histories are reassuring in this regard.

The third problem is that France is playing its own, personal, game in Libya. The presence of French special forces in Benina poses a serious doubt on the impartial role that every

negotiating broker should play. It is not a secret that France favors Haftar. Especially because the general is supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE, which means a very positive outlook as far as arms sales are concerned (including arms for Haftar himself). In addition to all this, there is the oil of Cyrenaica. Russia likes Haftar (and it seems he promised them the use of his naval bases), as does the US.

In this context, the French mediation seems to go in the opposite direction compared to the decisions of the UN Security Council, which recognize Serraj as the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people. In practice, the Paris meeting has legitimized the role of Haftar as (international) interlocutor of the Libyan crisis, despite his refusal of the UN resolutions.

The French initiative also penalizes Italy, that has put much effort in legitimizing the national reconciliation government led by Serraj. Italy is now politically marginalized. The fact that Serraj made a stop in Rome after the Paris meeting, while Haftar flew back to Libya is quite indicative in this regard. In backing Serraj, Italy has invested politically and economically in his government of national reconciliation, especially in terms of future immigration policies.

Perhaps it was a mistake on Italy's part not to have insisted on having an Italian national as the official negotiator of the crisis, as the UN Secretary General Guterres had suggested. The idea was scrapped because it was though inappropriate to have a negotiator from a former colonial power. Perhaps Italy was afraid of being sucked into the Libyan feuds; or to be put on the stand for its historical ties to Libya; or maybe they just thought that they would have more room to maneuver without having to abide to international limitations.

The reactions

Notwithstanding, the French initiative triggered a number of reactions. Serraj, made strong by Italian support, asked the boot-shaped peninsula to help him fight illegal immigration in Libyan waters. He first sought help, then denied the request, then reconfirmed it. Serraj's hesitation shows his utter political weakness.

To have Italian warships cruising in Libya's waters clearly undermines that country's national sovereignty and gives Haftar and the Tobruk government good grounds for complaints. Haftar was backed in his complaints by another member of the Presidential Council, Fathi Majburi. Majburi is from Cyrenaica and thought it is wise to side with the strong man in Benghazi. Strangely enough, general Haftar saw no sovereignty problem in having UAE and Egyptian warplanes stationed and operational in Libyan territory.

Feeling strong from the international backing he received, Haftar went so far as to threaten to bomb Italian ships that would dare enter Libyan waters. The fact that he has but a raggedy army made up of old Gheddafian supporters and a few, obsolete, Russian planes is not a problem because his intent is to create the cult of a 'strong man' who is fearless and invincible. In other words, he is trying to put his own feet in the dead Rais' shoes, even in terms of the verbal fight against Italian colonialism. But the political significance of the

above events is that Italy had to force its role in the Libyan crisis in order to remain central in unraveling its solution.

Haftar's dirty game

As soon as he returned to Benghazi from Paris, Haftar was interviewed by Asharq Al Aqsat. In the interview he stated that: he will run for president; the UN envoys designated so far are manipulated by the Islamic front (the new envoy Salamé has not been accused yet); this is Fayeze Serraj's last chance to hold true to his word (in another interview he told Serraj to go back to being an engineer); the Misurata militias will either bow or be destroyed; he is contrary to a federal system in Libya.

In another public statement, Haftar even publicly praised Gheddafi's son Seif al Islam, saying that he could play a political role in Libya's future. This proves that the general is supported by former Gheddafians. After the statement, Seif al Islam immediately exchanged the favor by accusing Italy of having fascist and colonialist aims on the country.

The strong man in Tripoli (backed by Misurata's militias) is the number two-man in the presidential council, Ahmed Maetig. Maetig didn't appreciate the meeting between Serraj and Haftar and took advantage of Serraj's absence to gratify economically Sirte's militias. During operation Bunyan Marsous, these militias had fought the ISIS, while others had battled for control of the Tripoli international airport against the Zintan militias (allied with Haftar). This was a way to affirm Maetig's independence and the armed support that makes him strong. Maetig was also disturbed by the fact that Serraj made an accord with Haftar without first consulting the presidential council.

The Paris accord

In the light of these internal and foreign reactions, we can safely say that the Paris accord did not ease national reconciliation in Libya. In fact, it hindered it.

The ten points of the Paris declaration, that were pompously undersigned by the two Libyan contenders and endorsed by a smiling Macron who sang the praises of the two courageous signatories was but a list of good intentions: the Libyan crisis can only be solved politically; the commitment to end hostilities; the commitment to recreate the conditions for a state of right in the country and to unify the institutions while guaranteeing the respect of human rights, of sovereignty and territorial integrity; a full application of the Skhirat accords; the Presidential Council and the Tobruk Parliament should play a role in the political debate; the bilateral meetings should continue to take place; the parties will strive to create conditions favorable for elections; an effort will be made to integrate the various armed groups into the national Libyan army (it is not yet clear whether we speak of Haftar's Libyan National Army or of the militias that back Serraj).

In addition to all of this, there is the commitment to fight terrorism (even though the term has different meanings for the two contenders) and to fight the phenomenon of illegal immigration (perhaps to soothe Italian irritation). Many words were spent, a lot of good intentions were expressed, but there is nothing that indicates an acceleration in the resolution to the Libyan crisis. Perhaps French president Macron didn't really care about

all of the above. Maybe he just wanted to play the self-proclaimed, prestigious, international broker and find his niche in the Libyan issue. And maybe he needed to gain credibility in the French military milieu after he ousted the head of the French armed forces, General Pierre de Villiers.

The last consideration is a historical paradox: France, which under Sarkozy had forced the military ousting of Gheddafi and triggered the social chaos that today reigns supreme in Libya, is now playing the peacemaker in the north African country. Sometimes history has a very short memory.

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The official history of the Middle East, at least the one written on history books or newspapers, is only a part of the story of what actually happened. We usually know who friends and foes are. And the external observers often decides whose side to be on. The truth is that there is also another history that we know very little about because it is part of a dirty game where the lead actors are not willing to speak up. Hidden truths, gray areas, arch-foes – at least officially – that conspire together along the lines of “my enemies enemy is my friend”, at least for as long as is necessary to attain their goals. A game of shadows where intelligence agencies play a key role and will carry their secrets to the grave.

Israel and the Saudis

Recently, a former Mossad official has unveiled part of these intrigues. In the mid 1960s there was a civil war in Yemen that saw the royalists supported by Saudi Arabia and the republicans by Egypt and the Soviet Union. At that time no one could envisage any type of relationship between Tel Aviv and Riyadh. But, as usually happens when two enemies face a common threat, both the Israelis and the Saudis feared Nasser’s nationalism and socialism. Gamal Abdel Nasser was a menace to the survival of the monarchies in the Arabic Peninsula and of Israel, as the 1967 Six Day War that followed showed.

Furthermore, in those days Egypt was a staunch ally of the Soviet Union, while Israel sided with the West. This is why Saudi Arabia contacted the Brits, the MI-6 called Mossad and the Israelis began shipping weapons and equipment to the royalists through an air lift. Weapons that bore no insignia or any other element that could help trace back their origin.

Everyone against Nasser

Another untold story is of when, in September 1958, the heads of the Intelligence Services of Turkey, Iran and Israel agreed to carry out a series of joint operations against Gamal Abdel Nasser and Egypt. A leonine contract supported by the US and that lasted until ayatollah Khomeini chased the Shah out in 1979. A common headquarter was created in the outskirts of Tel Aviv, where officers from each country were deployed and exchanged information on a daily basis monitoring both radical Arab countries and Soviet initiatives in the region. The deal also comprised arming Lebanese Shia factions, helping Jewish communities flee Iraq through Kurdistan and to Israel and contrasting Nasser’s subversive activities.

In 1978 then Iranian PM, Shapour Bakhtiar, went so far as asking Mossad to discuss the possibility of eliminating ayatollah Khomeini, then a refugee in France. The request was not implemented with all the consequences that followed. Including the killing of Bakhtiar himself by Iranian agents in Paris in 1991.

Secret Morocco

In the 70s Israel was also holding secret talks with Morocco, trained Hassan II’s bodyguards and provided technologically advanced intelligence equipment in exchange for

information on Arab summits. A trip to Rabat by Yitzhak Rabin to meet with the Moroccan king is part of this tangle of secret contacts. Rabin was wearing a blonde wig to avoid being recognized. More encounters followed in Morocco between Mossad and then Anwar Sadat's Deputy Prime Minister, Hassan Tuhami, who also met with Moshe Dayan, Israeli Foreign Minister at the time, who took his eye patch off for the occasion. These clandestine reunions led to the signature of the Camp David agreement in 1978 and the Israel-Egypt peace treaty in 1979.

Black September

There also more lesser known stories. At the end of the Six Day War in 1967 Jordan lost the West Bank and was flooded with Palestinian refugees. The Hashemite kingdom led by king Hussein was in an uncomfortable demographic position: the Palestinians had outnumbered the local beduin population. The circumstance was suggesting to Yasser Arafat and his fighters that they could create a Palestinian state in Jordan or, instead, use its territory as a rearguard for its well-armed factions. In September 1970, a month that went into history books as the "Black September", king Hussein and his loyal Arab legion made up of beduin soldiers declared war on the Palestinians. It was a carnage. The Palestinians fled. And who helped them escape?

It's not on the official history books, but the older fedayn know the story well. Although it may sound unlikely, Israel helped them out. Some may ask: weren't the Palestinians the arch-enemies of the Israelis? Wasn't king Hussein favoring their goals by getting rid of their armed factions? Why were the Israelis helping them cross into the West Bank, then Israel and all the way to Lebanon? The answer is pretty tortuous, especially for those who don't know the history of the Middle East.

At that time – dates are important – Israel needed to safeguard the territorial integrity of Jordan (king Hussein was constantly in touch with Golda Meir even when tensions arose) and, at the same time, destabilize neighboring Lebanon by pushing the Palestinians there. The outcome was the expected outbreak of a bloody sectarian civil war in Beirut only a few years later.

Side-effect Hamas

The rise of Hamas is another one of those dirty games ending with an unexpected outcome. Between 1988 and 1989 Israel's primary strategy was to weaken the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) led by Yasser Arafat. To reach its goals, Mossad favored the political rise of sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Gaza, whose sermons openly defied Abu Ammar's leadership. Fatah led the PLO and was a secular group as were other main factions – Democratic Front, Popular Front etc. – who were of marxist inspiration. Only a minor and insignificant group headed by sheikh Taysser Tamimi was clearly Islamist.

So what Israel did was to favor a strong Islamic current in contrast with the PLO's secularism to try to weaken Arafat's hegemonic role. What happened after that is that Hamas and Yassin grew so much and became so radical that they turned into Israel's main threat. Sheikh Yassin was arrested multiple times and was taken out by a targeted

air strike in 2004. With its control over Gaza, Hamas is presently much more of a menace to Tel Aviv than Abu Mazen's Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah. The same thing happened when the US supported and armed Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan to fight against the Russians and then saw him cheering after the Twin Towers were taken down.

However, Hamas and Israel have allegedly recently held a series of secret talks to negotiate a ceasefire. We still don't know if Qatar played a role and what the terms of the agreement are. No one is confirming the meetings, but a person knowledgeable of Palestinian affairs blew the whistle: Palestinian president Abu Mazen. It seems that the latest intifada in Jerusalem changed the scenario.

The Iranian nuclear threat

Over the past decade Iran has been the target of international sanctions to prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon. But in the 60s and 70s it was Israel, through Shimon Peres, that had offered nuclear technology to the Shah. In those days Iran was facing the Iraqi threat and had they had time to accept the offer there would have been no Geneva talks or deals with the ayatollah's regime. The deal with the US was brokered after lengthy contacts and secret talks held in Muscat, Oman, while Israel was planning to strike the Iranians. At least three attack plans were approved by two successive Israeli Prime Ministers, Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Over the last few months there has been talk of secret encounters in Amman by non-identified Arab countries and Israel. The Sunni regimes fear Iran's rise from the ashes after the deal on its nuclear program. Israel also considers Tehran a threat. And a common enemy pushes former foes closer. This could also help explain news of the opening of an Israeli embassy in Abu Dhabi.

THE MERCENARIES THAT UPHOLD MONARCHIES IN THE PERSIAN GULF

King Salman's Saudi Arabia is a country that, after decades of moderate policies and diplomacy, has suddenly become aggressive and belligerent. Pushed by his own son, the 30 year old Mohamed bin Salman, who has replaced his cousin, Mohamed bin Nayef, as crown prince, the Saudis want to lead Sunni Muslims against the Shia and fight against terrorism. The conflicts they are waging are part of that strategy, as are the creation of the so-called "Islamic NATO", the war in Yemen, the sanctions against Qatar and the threats against Iran.

Hence the question: does Saudi Arabia, and its allies from the UAE and Bahrain, have the military strength to wage all these conflicts and win them?

The conflict in Yemen

The Saudi deployment of 150 thousand men and a hundred or so fighter jets has strained the kingdom's military capabilities and produced little or no results. Yet, the Saudis are not alone, as they rely on thousands of mercenaries. The first batch is made up of Yemeni volunteers currently protecting the frontier between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. They come face to face with the Houthi rebels and are the ones suffering the most casualties in place of an army not willing to fight. Poverty and decent wages are a good enough reason to work for a well-off employer unlikely to sacrifice his own life. Three thousand Yemenis have already lost their lives fighting for the Saudis.

Then come the professionals from the private security companies and who deal with the most dangerous tasks. Guns for hire from the likes of Blackwater – whose name has now changed to Academi – alongside mercenaries from Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, Chechnya willing to risk their lives for a few thousand dollars. The toll stands at around 6 thousand contractors so far, although these are just estimates because no official figures are available.

Most of Saudi Arabia's military adventure in Yemen relies on "external" aid. The US provide logistical support, refuel Saudi fighter jets in mid-air and take care of the naval blockade in the Red Sea. The British have a strong presence in the intelligence sector. While a number of countries sell sophisticated weaponry to the kingdom: USA, UK, France, Germany, Canada, China and Italy.

Furthermore, crown prince Mohamed bin Salman also relies on the military aid from countries such as Pakistan, Senegal, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco. It is difficult to draw a line to distinguish whether these contributions are mercenaries paid by the Saudis or by their countries of origin.

However, if we look at this large deployment of forces, the massive presence of foreign volunteers and the technical assistance from the West and compare it to the scarce results on the ground against a badly equipped rag-tag rebel army, it is legitimate to wonder what Saudi Arabia's true military strength is. Given this background, a future conflict against Iran could never be fought without the help of some superpower as Saudi Arabia seems to have overstated its military capabilities.

The Emirates and the mercenaries

Most of the countries in the Persian Gulf rely on mercenaries. The UAE, who shares the Saudis' warmongering attitude, also rely on Private Security Companies such as the heirs of Blackwater or Global Enterprises to fight in their stead. The Emirates sent a brigade of Latin American contractors in Yemen. Soldiers of fortune from El Salvador, Panama, Chile and Colombia (chosen for their experience against the FARC) have been sent to the frontline by Abu Dhabi. Some 2 thousand men who are not on the official death toll or accountable for the systematic violations of human rights that regularly surface on the media. The United Arab Emirates have also deployed hundreds of Eritreans. It is unclear whether they are mercenaries or were sent in by Isaias Afewerki. The only difference being who pays the price for their safety.

The UAE also need foreign manpower to deal with their security back home. With a population of 9.2 million people, foreign workers amount to 7.8 million. The demographic threat can only be fought with the repression of any form of dissent, systematic human rights violations and discrimination. This takes the form of indiscriminate arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, kangaroo courts and no freedom of association or of the press.

The intelligence agencies in the Emirates are flooded with British experts, both as trainers and on the ground. The MI-6 feels at home in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, as do the French from the DGSE and the Americans from the CIA. Partnerships in the defense sector rely on government-to-government deals with the UK and the US. The Emirates purchase anglo-american weapons, French fighter jets and hire British experts for cyber security. British and American Private Security Companies carry out the dirty work on behalf of the Emirates' security forces.

The other countries in the Gulf

Another country that relies on mercenaries is Bahrain, the Sunni regime ruling over a Shia majority. In 2011, during the so-called Arab Spring, the Emir al Khalifa survived the protests with the help of troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In the long term, the regime is trying to alter the country's demographics, by favoring the influx of Sunnis and giving them a passport. The same goes for the security forces: while the intelligence agencies are under the MI-6's wing, several Pakistanis have been recruited alongside Jordanians, Syrians and even Iraqis who used to work for Saddam Hussein's Mukhabarat.

The same can be said for Kuwait. With 4 million inhabitants, 2.3 million are expats coming from India, Egypt, Pakistan, Syrian, Palestine-Jordan or Philippines, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. With these demographics, there is no national army that can withstand a threat without a foreign support. This is where the US have stepped in, with the CIA training the local anti-terrorism intelligence agency and also supplying weapons and training to the air forces.

Idem in Oman, where the British control the security forces, and in Qatar, where a large US military base and a Turkish contingent protect the Emir Tamin bin Hamad al Thani.

A Gulf without mercenaries?

It is pretty clear that without foreign assistance, or foreign manpower to wage wars or grant security at home, all of the countries in the Persian Gulf would have a hard time surviving a turbulent region. None of these anti-democratic monarchies that still benefit from the post-colonial partition and spheres of influence would not resist a single minute in case of a popular uprising. Their power lies on the persuasive sound of money, until oil has a value that is. Money can buy them weapons, soldiers for hire, training and security. But to think that they can use it to wage wars abroad against foreign enemies is definitely a risky gamble.