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PARADOXICAL AFRICANISATION OF LIBYA AFTER 2011. GROWING INFLUENCE OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN GOVERNMENT, REBEL, DIPLOMATIC AND CRIMINAL ACTORS IN THE POST-GADDAFI STATE

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IEMed.
European Institute of the Mediterranean

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Paradoxical Africanisation of Libya after 2011. Growing Influence of Sub-Saharan African Government, Rebel, Diplomatic and Criminal Actors in the Post-Gaddafi State

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The 2011 downfall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi marked a tipping point for Libya's southern neighbours in re-defining their roles on the regional north-south axis. The era of an assertive Libyan foreign policy on Africa came to a halt. Simultaneously, as a consequence of the civil war, multiple African actors, both state and non-state, assumed greater influence inside and over Libya. The country moved from being an exporter of security and insecurity to sub-Saharan Africa, as under Gaddafi, to becoming an importer. Some aspects of this largely unnoticed, multi-dimensional "Africanisation"[1] of Libya are likely to take root.

Changes in Libya's and sub-Saharan African actors' standings within the regional setting represent a new reality on the ground that has not been contextualised and analysed thoroughly enough. Only when the international actors do so will they be able to adequately navigate and constructively engage social, political and security structures within the Libya-sub-Saharan Africa framework. Thus, this paper aims to answer the following research questions: in which specific north-south security-related phenomena did sub-Saharan African actors assume agency? Are the motivations of the actors involved opportunistic or do they include long-term political goals? Which aspects of "Africanisation" are taking solid roots and could be sustained beyond the period of Libya's instability? Will this change to the regional order be temporary and reversible? What are the implications for the European Union (EU) policies related to peace, security and governance in Libya? For the research, several interviews with representatives of the regional armed groups, policy advisors, policy-makers and researchers with an insightful understanding of local and regional dynamics have been conducted since 2018, including during field research in Sudan in 2019. Those have been supplemented by a comprehensive review of existing literature on cross-border conflict dynamics in the Libya-Sudan-Chad-Niger borderlands, Libya-sub-Saharan African relations and relevant documents of international organisations. Historical methods focusing on the long-term and comprehensive processes seen within a big picture are being supplemented with an analytical approach seeking logical consequences and formulating predictions out of hard data and a comparative approach, where models, institutions and experiences are put together with more or less adequate processes found elsewhere.

Introduction

Historically, in the postcolonial era, Libya's relationship with its southern, sub-Saharan neighbourhood was one of being a provider of (in)security undertakings, patronage and political meddling.

Chad, Niger and to some extent Sudan constituted Libya's uncontested spheres of influence. By the late 1970s, Libya carried out targeted assassinations of political figures opposed to its interferences in Chad, Niger, Sudan, Senegal and Gambia. Its – eventually unsuccessful – military intervention in Chad in the 1980s remained Libya's most significant international engagement. It involved stationing forces in Sudan's Darfur to secure encirclement of Chad, and the

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1. For the purpose of this text, "Africanisation" of Libya will relate to those areas where reality was/is being shaped by sub-Saharan actors and subject to their interests, where they were/are the active and agenda-setting side of the relationship.

impression of a Libyan southwards drive resonated so heavily on the continent that Zaire supported Chad to oppose the perceived expansion before it reached its borders (Huliaras, 2001).

The Libyan hand remained a constantly present ingredient in any major political and security developments south of its borders, although its goals kept on changing. In Sudan, Gaddafi first helped President Jafaar Nimeiri survive a coup (1971) before launching his own to topple him (1976). Similar changes of favour applied to Somalia's Siad Barre and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. The interventionist drive was supported with the establishment of certain sub-Saharan Africa-oriented institutions. Graduates of the Libya-based World Revolutionary Center (WRC), the self-proclaimed academy of revolutionary cadres, included future coup-plotter presidents such as Blaise Campaore (Burkina Faso, 1986) and Idriss Déby (Chad, 1990). Liberian and Sierra Leonean warlords-turned-politicians Charles Taylor and Foday Sankoh trained and armed in Libya before launching devastating civil conflicts in those countries. Between 1979 and 1987 Sahelian immigrants, often Tuaregs, were recruited into the so-called Islamic Legion as agents of a promised future Libyan-controlled Islamic empire – in reality, they ended up as low-paid foot soldiers in the war with Chad. The Legion's veterans stirred conflicts in Sudan's Darfur, and contributed to Mali's and Niger's Tuareg rebellions in the 1990s.

By the late 1980s, it was evident that supporting insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa brought few lasting benefits, and prolonging the conflict in Chad became too costly for Libya. The country's African policies required a rethink. However, instead of scaling them down, as anticipated after the withdrawal from Chad in 1994, new impetus garnered pace. This time the approach was meant to be peaceful and developmental. Gaddafi became a *spiritus movens* for the creation of the African Union (AU), aiming not only to encourage greater regional integration but also to promote himself as the organisation's leader in different capacities, including that of the somehow grotesque "King of Kings", "nominated" by 200 traditional rulers from across the continent (BBC, 2008). This symbolised the pattern of buying friends as a well-tested method for keeping the continental support for the Gaddafi-led process of building African "sovereignty".

The civil war and the fall of Gaddafi in 2011[2] put this aspect of the regional order in question. The sub-Saharan African

2. After the Arab Spring-inspired uprising that challenged Gaddafi, the subsequent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention and the civil war, Gaddafi's administration disintegrated and the longtime leader was killed on 12 October 2011 by militias from Misrata, nominally under the opposition-umbrella government, the National Transitional Council (NTC). By 2012 the first post-Gaddafi parliament, the General National Council (GNC), was elected but the new institutions struggled to achieve nationwide recognition and failed to take control over the rapidly multiplying militias. East-West and Islamist-non-Islamist divisions grew. With the newly-elected (in June 2014) non-Islamist House of Representatives (HoR) moving to the eastern city of Tobruk and the previous GNC – with heavy Islamist presence – continuing in Tripoli, the country was effectively split between rival administrations, which led to another phase of the civil war (2014-2015). A compromise was sought with the Libya Political Agreement (LPA) signed in Skhirat in December 2015, establishing the internationally recognised Government of National Accord headed by Fayez al-Sarraj. East-based strongman General Khalifa Haftar never fully recognised it and the East-West split deepened. The picture was further complicated with the emergence of the Islamic State

dimension of Libyan foreign policy faded away, pushed by the rising anti-black sentiments among the larger population (derived from racism and the perception that sub-Saharan Africans had stood with Gaddafi). The last major pushes towards the south – post-mortem seizures of a kind – came with the exodus of Libyan-based Tuareg fighters (many of whom had served in the Libyan army) to Mali in early 2012, which sparked the conflict in the north of that country, and the uncontrolled leaking of arms robbed from Gaddafi's depots into black markets south of the Sahara.

An unprecedented period where sub-Saharan Africa took a pause from suffering – or enjoying – Libyan interventionism allowed it to develop a growing ability and agency to expand their power projections northbound. With the stage cleared for a role-reversal (Campasso et al., 2019), a wide array of new forms of engagements by the sub-Saharan actors in Libya developed shortly after. Those were to be driven by numerous motivations: domestic power struggles in countries of origin, needs to answer inter-state security dilemmas, bold greed, opportunism, identity and ethnic ties, quest for recognition as well as some strategic calculations.

Southern Libya: gate for sub-Saharan African involvement

While the Libyan civil war is mostly centred on the Tripolitania-Cyrenaica horizontal axis, where 90% of the Libyan population resides, its unfolding contributed to deepening of the security vacuum, and lifting of the importance of the country's southern, sparsely populated, most "African" regions: parts of Fezzan and the Kufra bordering with Chad and Sudan. These areas' dark-skinned, non-Arab Tubu ethnic group, whose territory is shared between Libya and Chad (with some presence also in Niger and Sudan) and whose members often hold multiple citizenships, suffered marginalisation throughout modern Libyan history.[3]

The anti-Gaddafi uprising of 2011 resonated strongly among the Tubu, who took control of a big part of the south, including the towns (Kufra) and oil and water reserves. Around Kufra an enmity with the Arab Zway tribe – traditionally supported by Tripoli – was temporarily put aside. The alliance with Awlad Suleiman tribesmen helped to solidify Tubu positions from the Nigerien border to Muz-

(IS) structures in Libya, centred in the former Gaddafi stronghold of Sirte before it was rooted out from it in 2016. Haftar, fighting both moderate and extremist Islamist forces, gathered support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as France and Russia, while the Tripoli government was supplied by Qatar and Turkey. Haftar's would-be-final offensive on Tripoli launched in 2019 sparked another phase of the conflict, characterised by increased deployment of Russian and Turkish-sponsored forces for Haftar and GNA respectively. The latter proved critical for defending the city and pushing attacking forces away, while the increasing financial leverage of the UAE on Haftar made him further more dependent on its backing. The August 2020 ceasefire was followed by political dialogue which led to appointment of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh as Prime Minister in March 2021 and an anticipation of elections by the end of that year.

3. Except for the 1980s when Gaddafi offered citizenship to many of their Chadian fellows (as well as to Chadian and Nigerien Tuareg and Arab Awlad Suleiman tribesmen) as a reward for keeping control over the contested Auzou strip.

ruk, and support from the Benghazi revolutionary factions translated into gains in Sabha (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). They were now in control of border crossings, airstrips, and oil depots in those areas. They embarked on a trajectory for a higher material, political and cultural status and sought to keep the newly-achieved positions. While in the Libyan discourse the Tubu were often seen as an extension of sub-Saharan Africa, aliens rather than fellow Libyans (Eaton et al., 2020), the increasing "Tubu power" – both military and in replacing state with their own local structures (Badi, 2020) – became a talk of the day throughout Libya around 2012 (Murray, 2012).

Securing those gains became difficult for the Tubu after short-lived local alliances (with Zway, Awlad Suleiman and Tuareg) began to decompose, and inter-ethnic rivalries were reinforced by competition over resources and strategic locations. Additionally, the Tubu began to see themselves as betrayed by actors from the north of the country, apparently returning to a pattern of non-recognition. The NTC failed to register them en masse for the 2012 elections. Libya Shield (Benghazi), in its subsequent interventions following Tubu-Zway clashes in Kufra in 2012, openly sided with the Zway. Furthermore, the southern agenda of General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), was increasingly pro-Awlad Sulaiman.

The Libyan Tubu, while cautious with getting involved in foreign agendas, saw their control over border crossings as offering transboundary means to influence Libyan dynamics. Several flashpoints, such a Kufra (near the Sudanese border), Sabha (the capital of the Fezzan province) and Ubari (where Tubu and Tuareg influences meet),[4] remained particularly vulnerable to foreign interferences.

Sudanese, Chadian, and Nigerien rebels and militias grasping opportunities in Libya

The Darfuri rebels' expansion into Libya came as a result of a mix of opportunity and shrinking alternatives in their region after the Sudan-Chad rapprochement of 2010, government advances in Darfur, and the eruption of the civil war in South Sudan, where they kept a presence in 2013 (J. Tubiana, personal communication, October 2017). Around 2015 nobody wanted to miss its place in a race towards Libya. A similar movement developed among Chadian armed opposition groups. The trend became so visible that a major of Sabha, in a 2018 TV address, decried the alleged "occupation" of southern Libya by foreign forces. All the rebels primarily expected to win access to new military equipment, particularly vehicles, repair their budgets, and establish bases. To achieve those goals, they naturally tended to get involved in mercenary business, banditry or smuggling, before thinking of a return.

Who depends on whom?

Factions of the Libyan conflict (pro- and anti-Haftar) where mercenary involvement steadily grew increasingly relied on Sudanese and Chadian manpow-

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4. There, by 2012 mutual recognition of informal borders between their homelands along the southern Libyan border collapsed. It was based in the 1894 "Midi-Midi" treaty giving Tuaregs border West of El Salvador corridor (meaning control of today's Algerian border) and the Tubu east of it (today: borders with Niger, Chad and Sudan).

er, which "Africanised" the frontlines of the Libyan conflict. Contrary to 2011, when sub-Saharan African mercenaries fully depended on the survival of Gaddafi, those fighting for Haftar or Western Libyan groups held multiple cards. They could provide or withdraw a critical mass of fighters, threaten or perform walkouts, change sides or resort to ethnic loyalties brought from Sudan or Chad at the expense of Libyan factional goals. In some instances, it was difficult to say whether it was the dog (sponsor, nominal political patron) wagging the mercenary tail or the other way around.

Apparently, the Darfuri Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) militiamen securing oil facilities of Ras Lanuf and Sidra on Haftar's LNA behalf, allowed them to be taken over by the Benghazi Defence Brigade and Chadian mercenaries in 2017 because they did not want to fight their fellow tribesmen working for rival factions (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). While in most cases Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries' role was supplementary, they became invaluable in remote areas due to their mobility and experience in the desert. In Haftar's 2016-2017 offensive on the oilfields, Darfuri rebels outnumbered the original Haftar forces with equipment provided for securing oil facilities. The SLA-MM faction, the most numerous of the Darfuri movements in Libya around 2017, played a critical role in Haftar's advance towards Jufra in that year (UNSC, 2017).

The numerical force and experience were particularly valuable for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the pro-government Sudanese militia that grew to prominence under Omar al-Bashir. Shortly after the RSF facilitated the toppling of this president in April 2019 and the establishment of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), seen by the protesters as an obstacle to realising civilian rule, it sought an image boost from the Canadian PR company Dickens & Madson Inc (Africa Intelligence, 2019). RSF's leader Mohamed Daglo "Hemeti" signed a $6 million contract with it on 7 May 2019, where the Canadians suggest the RSF go to Libya to fight for Haftar – its former client – as part of the broader setting facilitating TMC's international recognition (Ahmed, 2019). RSF was at that time comparable to, if not bigger than, Haftar's Libyan National Army (F. Hikmat, personal communication, August 2019), and its massive involvement, as in the deployment of up to 40,000 troops in the Yemen war in 2016-2017, could have been a game-changer. For the Sudanese pro-government militia, the deal was not that critical – until now, its notorious reputation has not prevented it from becoming a top regional power broker. Eventually, with the contract exposed by the media and prospects for wide acceptance ruined after the RSF perpetrated the 3 June massacre in Khartoum, only a limited deployment could have materialised.

Rebels and militias setting agendas?

Rebel groups from Sudan, Chad and Niger sought new alliances and occasionally found space for realisation of their own political goals. Although, throughout the Libyan conflict, the Zaghawa-Tubu encounters seemed to be mostly opportunistic, a political footprint could have been found in the Darfuri rebels' fight alongside Tubus in Ubari in 2014 and Kufra in 2015. In particular, the Darfuri Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) was successful in winning the hearts and minds of the Tubu of Kufra as it presented Sudan's government support to Libya's Zway in the framework of a possible new Arabisation drive, which looked like a repetition of the scenario from the Dar-

fur war from the early 2000s. Thus, a historically significant faction of the Darfuri rebels managed to forge an ad-hoc Sudani-Libyan African people's forces' alliance, based on common experience and ethnic ties (Zaghawas and the Tubu are related), in order to protect themselves from the perceived transnational Arabist agenda. Individuals from the Tubu community are among the JEM leadership and members of this group do not rule out the emergence of a broader political project in the future if Tubu aspirations are clarified (JEM leadership representative, personal communication, August 2018).

The JEM and the Chadian Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), who shared a history of close ties, jointly fought the Libyan IS fighters in 2016 (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). Moreover, Chadian and Sudanese factions made up of the Zaghawa tribe, which found themselves on opposite sides of the Libyan war, tended to avoid confrontations.

The Chadian Tubu militias, originally from the Tibesti basin, have had a long history of engagements with Libya, dating back to Gaddafi's expansionist project in the late 1970s and 1980s, which complicated the notions of a distinctive Chadianhood and Libyanhood. With the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war in Libya, Tubu commanders from Chad, including Omar Togoïmi, leader of the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT), assisted the Libyan Tubu in securing their advances in Sabha and elsewhere in the south of Libya (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). Similarly, powerful Nigerien rebel leaders made their way to Libya to assume roles in the nascent Tubu movement in Libya and supplied their Libyan peers with manpower in local tribal conflicts throughout the south.

Take the money and go!

The "sending" Sudanese, Chadian and Nigerien groups saw their presence alongside Libyan fighters as a means to supplement the budgets of their original organisations, and to eventually win advantage over their rivals back in the homelands. This would be the case of the original "janjaweed" (loyal to Musa Hilal), who were overshadowed by the RSF in Sudan, and via Libya sought means to make a political comeback. Similarly, the SLA-MM attempted to re-enter Darfur from Libya in May 2017 with newly-acquired Egyptian vehicles (Sudan Tribune, 2017).

Divisions and increased isolation of exiled political leaders of the Sudanese and Chadian rebel/mercenary troops led to their fragmentation – they could be found on opposite sides of specific confrontations. This led to attempts to consolidate them. With time, most of the Sudanese rebels found themselves alongside Haftar. On the other hand, the Third Force, arguably the country's most cohesive force, originating from the revolutionary bulwark of Misrata (Lacher, 2020), showed a preference for Chadian anti-government fighters, which in 2016 and 2017 resulted in luring many Chadians who served in the ranks of the rival. Although instrumental in nature, the Third Force seemed to offer a platform conforming with wider regional goals of the Chadian rebels offering them to rally around the anti-Haftar, and by extension, anti-Déby force. Similarly, Chadian Mahamat Mahadi attempted – only partly successfully – to bring scattered former rebels of the Goran tribe together (Tubiana, 2021). The change in priorities resulted in his forces' growing distant from the Libyan war factions and focusing on renewed involvement in Chad. This perspective resulted in Mahadi's Front for

Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) faction "opening gates" for Haftar's forces entry to the Fezzan region in 2017, pledging loyalty to him, taking as much equipment as possible and leaving for Chad in early 2021 to launch an offensive against Idriss Déby's government in which the president died. FACT exploited both the Third Force's and then Haftar's dependence on its manpower only to abandon both without prior notice once it felt ready to implement its Chadian agenda.

Sub-Saharan governments' interventions inside Libya

While the Gaddafi government extensively used its military, political and financial potential to intercede inside sub-Saharan states' territories, reverse interventions were unimaginable. Libya's abdication from this role and southern neighbours' incursions into Libya are probably the most striking examples of the U-turn in the way power is being exercised along the north-south axis.

For whom to police the troubled peripheries?

In the late 1990s and 2000s Libya acted as a self-appointed "policeman" of the Sahara and Sahel regions. Its deep contacts with state agencies, current and former insurgents, tribal brokers and criminal networks allowed Libya to help quell cross-border threats. In 2003, the involvement of the Gaddafi Charity Foundation helped to secure the release of 32 Europeans allegedly kidnapped by Islamists on the Algeria-Niger border. The same body in 2006 negotiated the release of Italian tourists kidnapped in

eastern Niger and held by the Tubu-dominated Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (FARS), who wanted to use them to pressure the Nigerien government (BBC, 2006). Similarly, in 2008 the Austrian government called on Gaddafi to help the release of its citizens captured in Mali by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam, together with associates of the Burkinabe President Blaise Campaore, became a key intermediary in similar incidents that required negotiations with AQIM operatives on the ground (Shaul, 2010).

After the fall of Gaddafi, not only did this activity cease to exist but the very members of his family found themselves dependent on the protection extended by the government of Niger. After initially hosting Saadi Gaddafi, who sought safety in Niamey, Niger eventually arrested and deported him to Libya in 2014 in a bid to push away potential threats to its borders emerging from Libya's south (Laessing & Bosalum, 2014).

The void left by Libya's withdrawal from policing the Sahara and Sahel was eventually filled by the Chadian army, the region's most capable, who became a key Western ally in combating Jihadist groups. Chad, like Libya in the 2000s, was eager to go where it was too risky for others, this time militarily. This included north of Mali as gate-openers before French forces in 2013, entering Nigeria in pursuit of Boko Haram fighters in 2015, patrolling the extreme north of Mali under the MINUSMA banner and entering the Burkina-Niger-Mali border triangle in early 2021 as part of the G5 Sahel.

In the symbolic overturn of fortunes, in mid-2018 the Sudanese government sent its National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISS) team to southern Libya

for an operation to release five Egyptian soldiers kept hostage by an armed group (Africa News, 2018). Such action proved to be beyond the capacities of rival Libyan administrations of that time, while the Sudanese were able to act inside Libya's fluid security setting.

Neighbours' attempted buffer zones and proxies inside Libya

Chad and Sudan now considered themselves entitled to cross Libya's borders to oppose their own rebel activities and shape the local security environment. Contrary to the established pattern, Sudan, Chad and Niger began to increasingly see their northern borderlands as an area of shared concern and responsibility. A series of conferences held in Niamey, N'Djamena and Khartoum in 2018 and 2019 sought to establish joint border security mechanisms. On 31 May 2018 in Niger, the three states and the Libyan GNA agreed to allow cross-border raids in pursuit of rebels (Saeneen, Tubiana & Warin, 2018). This provision was largely designed to formalise the already existing practice of sub-Saharan governments' incursions and projecting their *strategic depth* inside Libya. They saw Libya as a regional troublemaker and considered themselves responsible for and capable of limiting fallouts of its misbehaviour.

Sudan's al-Bashir government invested in extending patronage over the Arab Zway community in Libya's Kufra around 2014-2016. As Khartoum wished, the Zway had been chosen as the Libyan component in the joint border patrols with the Sudanese RSF militia. This was meant to limit the transboundary commercial relations of the Darfuri rebels and to strengthen the commercial link between the Zway and the Darfuri Arabs – especially in the camel trade (Tubiana

& Gramizzi, 2018). In September 2014, Libyan authorities then headed by the eastern Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani accused Sudan of interfering in its internal affairs by sending an aircraft with supplies to the Zway. But, as early as October Sudan and Libya came to a common understanding that reinforcement was meant for them as the Libyan component of the joint border patrols (Butty, 2014). Libya effectively acknowledged the Sudanese interference, but accepted the Sudanese narrative about it.

The logic of the support for the Zway reflected the one applied by the Sudanese authorities domestically in the Darfur conflict: it allowed a tribally-based proxy to be established, funded on a shaky Arab identity mark in the ethnically and socially complex environment. In this respect, the local southern Libyan conflict between the Zway and the Tubu intensified because it became an echo of Darfur's (Capasso et al., 2019).

In 2015, armaments provided by the Sudanese government helped Zway Arab militias to retake the Kufra-Sudan road, and in 2016 the Sudanese RSF fought Tubu inside Libya's Kufra region to limit their access to the Darfuri rebels and to re-establish Zway control over the Libya-Sudan border (Capasso et al., 2019). The Sudan government and its militias were effectively able to enrol their Libyan counterparts as juniors to them and to play a proxy game inside Libya to secure a backdoor to their own troubled peripheries.

For the Chadian government, similarly to Sudan's, the main preoccupation was to limit its rebels' access to Libya. The intensity of the army's incursions across the border kept growing since they began to be noted in the Kufra area in 2013. The most vigorous ones occurred

in September 2018 when raids north of the Kouri Bougoudi were carried out, shortly after the three states' and GNA's free-pass agreement (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018).

The Chadian authorities sought alliances with some factions of the Tubu in Libya, and even at one point attempted to secure influence over the entire Tubu movement in this country. While this project failed, until 2017-2018 Chad still successfully limited Tubu access to different Chadian groups based in Libya.[5] In another bid, N'Djamena attempted to support Nigerien Tubu leader Barka Sidimi. Those measures proved, in the long run, to be unproductive. The Tubu traditionally did not trust externally imposed leaders.

As in the case of the Sudan government, the Chadian authorities developed a pattern of securing their own space inside Libya. This goal was to be achieved by a build-up of the Chadian army in the Kouri Bougoudi area, on Libya's doorstep. However, the Chadian army retreated from the borderland in mid-2018 after it suffered a cross-border attack by another group of rebels, the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR), and after its influence among the Tubu decreased following military operations in the Tibesti mountains (Misiki and other areas), where Tubu civilians suffered.

The Nigerien government forces were less inclined to intervene largely due to the "externalisation" of the issues of the country's northern border, seen by the EU as a major transit route for uncontrolled Europe-bound migrations. Apparent attempts by the then Nigerien Interior Minister Mohamed Bazoum to support the Awlad Suleiman (Arab) forces around Sabha, and subsequent Nigerien peace-making efforts there, in 2013 and then in 2018, were probably exceptional. Still, the government's success in preventing Libyan turmoil from extending into Niger – which involved careful use of local actors with transboundary authority to mediate easing emerging tensions in the country's north-east – proved to be a landmark novelty in the history of Libya-Niger relations and a fundamental change of their vector.

Criminal networks exploring, expanding and controlling illicit trades

As southern Libya remained ungoverned, Chadian, Sudanese and Nigerien criminal actors developed their trades and largely reconfigured the local and regional illicit schemes. Rebels, mercenaries, traffickers or extortionists – they all eyed up controlling the smuggling routes across the southern border (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). Since the 1990s, Gaddafi's native Qadhadhfa tribesmen had been the key operators on the border with Niger towards Agadez. This meant they, along with the Awlad Suleiman, were among the main beneficiaries of the cigarettes movement and acted as unofficial state "eyes and ears" on crossings. After 2011, the Tubu effectively replaced

5. Around 2017-2018 the context changed when the Nation for Democracy and Justice in Chad, FNDJT, gathering fighters from numerous ethnicities, was formed in Murzuk. It established connections to the chadian Tubu rebels in Tibesti.

them in this capacity and even prevented Qadhadhfa and Awlad Suleiman from nearing the border (Tubiana & Gramizzi, 2018). The Tubu role on the Nigerien border increased further with the closure of the Algeria-Libya border, where Tuareg traffickers faced a harsh crackdown by Algerian authorities (Wehrey, 2017). As for northbound hashish, the Sudanese RSF were reported to have taken control of a supply route from the Kafia-Kingi enclave on the Sudan, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) tri-border – apparently without consent from the government in Khartoum. Chadian and Sudanese Zaghawa, for their part, became increasingly present as road bandits and operators of illegal checkpoints in different sections of the southern Libyan border, including the Libya-Niger frontier, as well as escorts for drug traffickers (Saeneen, Tubiana & Warin, 2018).

Since 2017, the RSF promoted their deployment on the northern borders of Sudan projecting a sense of "responsibility" for blocking illegal migrations that would be appreciated by the EU (Rapid Support Forces website, 2021). The Sudanese militia, also enlisting Chadian and other Sahelian nationals, became a player in a context where the uncontrollable nature of Libya's southern provinces prevented the implementation of any coherent migration-related policies. Hence the Italy-Libya agreement of 2009, which included the establishment of a deportation site in Kufra (Human Rights Watch, 2009), or the one discussed between the EU and Gaddafi in 2010. While the RSF sought to position themselves as the EU's proxies capable of "managing"

northbound flows of people, simultaneously they were able to monopolise the human movement, facilitating it using their own vehicles and routes.

A similar career path can be traced in the re-emergence to prominence of the former Nigerien rebel leader Barka Sidimi, who since 2017 has positioned himself as the leader of the border protection effort against migrants on the border between Niger and Libya (Penney, 2018). Talks that took place between Sidimi's "Sahara Falcons" and the EU representatives envisaged the apparent readiness of the European partners to seal and fund such collaborations. This pushed other local militias to seek similar roles. Sidimi himself, like his rivals, had long been involved in human trafficking, so, again, a double game of blocking and enabling migrant movements was likely to develop (Saeneen, Tubiana & Warin, 2018).

Involvement of multiple sub-Saharan actors in human trafficking on both sides of the Libyan border was not new – in particular the Tubu car drivers since at least the 2000s played and continue to play a role in smuggling people. What is certain is that the new anti-trafficking "rush to the north" around 2017 was driven by the realities of the absence of a strong Libyan centre capable of dealing – directly or indirectly – with its borders, and a European demand for filling the void.[6] The RSF's, Sidimi's and others' influences on both sides of the frontier made them feel comfortable seeking to replace Libyan state as key interlocutors in international migration control.

6. This also refers to the 2012-2015 period where the EU funds where chanelled to local forces through Tripoli-based government. In later period, Tubu factions appeared to prefer seeking independent roles.

On a different note, the southern Libyan borderlands with Chad and Niger became subject to the new gold rush as the first regional discoveries in North Darfur (2012) were followed by similar ones across Sudan, Chad, Niger, Libya and Algeria. Gold mining attracted criminal networks, made up of former rebels, bandits or migrant smugglers, often Chadian and Sudanese Zaghawa. Their transnational links made them, and not the Libyan state, capitalise on the mining business, particularly between the Kouri Bougoudi border area (Chad-Libya) and Umm al-Aranib (UNSC, 2020).

From Libya's diplomatic power in Africa to African solutions for Libya

The AU, as well as Libya's direct neighbours, previously instrumentalised by Gaddafi, increasingly sought to achieve a greater role in shaping Libya's post-conflict future. Libya's relations with African institutions have traditionally been asymmetric. Gaddafi exploited existing or nurtured new international organisations to achieve leverage for his foreign policy goals. Those were to be achieved with the use of Libya's deep pockets. In 1973, in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, financial pressure on the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU, AU's predecessor) member states in the run-up to the Addis Ababa summit helped to push the then majority (almost 20) of sub-Saharan African courtiers to sever ties to Israel (Miller, 1975). In 1998, Libya – then vigorously filling the aid gap on the continent left after competitors of the Cold War reduced engagement – was able to convince the OAU summit in Ouagadougou to call for the UN to suspend sanctions on Libya (Huliaras, 2001).

In 1998 it initiated the creation of a new regional organisation, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Sudan as its founding members (later expanded to 29 members with the notable exception of Algeria and Ethiopia) and secretariat in Tripoli. It set up a Special Solidarity Fund in 2001 for humanitarian needs and in 2009 initiated some facilitations for free movement (NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency, 2015). Still, the organisation remained mainly a transmission belt of Libyan initiatives. It gave a face to the largely Libyan intervention in the CAR in 2001 (The New Humanitarian, 2002) in defence of Libya's protégé, President Ange-Félix Patassé, from whom it obtained a 99-year lease to exploit its natural resources (Farah, 2011). After 2011 the organisation largely stalled before seeking a more independent status with a focus on countering terrorism.

Gaddafi's Libya played a vital role in facilitating peace processes during Mali's and Niger's 2007-2009 Tuareg uprisings. It reached out to factions on the ground and brought Niger's Aghaly ag Alambo to meet Gaddafi in August 2008, after which he declared a halt to armed activities, as did Mali's Ibrahim Ag Bahanga. In March 2009, Gaddafi went to Niamey to facilitate prisoner exchange (Czerep, 2011).

After a major rift with the Arab League over the United Nations (UN) sanctions in 1998 and the establishment of the AU in 1999, in which Gaddafi was instrumental, the "look to the south" perspective became a cornerstone of Libyan foreign policy. Libya became the most important contributor to the AU budget, accounting for approximately 15%, as well as effectively taking multiple sub-Saharan African states on its payroll by pay-

ing their membership fees. By doing so it solidified clientelist relations with states like Malawi or Liberia, and for others – Niger, Zimbabwe – Libya was a major provider of development aid. Remittances from sub-Saharan African workers in Libya constituted a significant portion of the home countries' economies. In 2010, Gaddafi, confident of his position, attempted to overstay as AU's chairman beyond the routine one-year rotating term, but the AU structures, in a rare act of independence, rejected the plan (Reuters, 2010).

The pro-Gaddafi stance of the AU itself was evident during the 2011 uprising and the civil war when it was still seen as Colonel's proxy. Mediation offers extended by the AU were based on the principle of Gaddafi staying in power – Jacob Zuma's April "roadmap to peace" (which Gaddafi supported), which included a call for a halt of NATO bombings and political dialogue, was rejected by the rebels (McGreal et al., 2011). The organisation was also among the last to acknowledge his fall and to recognise the NTC as the de facto government – it only happened on 20 September 2011 (Cropley, 2020), weeks after the United States (US), European states or China had done so, acknowledging the reality on the ground.

Because of its historically biased stance, early signals of the AU's willingness to play a constructive role in Libya were not taken seriously. Still, slowly, the AU High-Level Committee on Libya – a grouping of heads of states, in which President of the Republic of Congo Denis Sassou-Nguesso assumed chairmanship – started to come to terms with the new reality. By the end of the last decade, it would express ambitions to take

charge of finding a solution to the Libyan crisis – an African solution.

Before serious peace efforts reached continental level, individual sub-Saharan African actors made their attempts. In October 2014, the then Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir first announced the launch of his own plan for peace in Libya. He declared details would be worked out by meetings of neighbours in Khartoum and that he was in touch with all Libyan factions. All neighbouring states and the Libyan prime minister agreed to it in principle (Butty, 2014). For al-Bashir, such initiatives were meant to present him as a man of peace, which could repair his image marred by the genocide charges at the International Criminal Court.[7] Still, a southern neighbour declaring an intention to fix Libya was a novelty. The Sudanese initiative evolved into a neighbouring countries format, where the southern ones played a significant role (Sudan Tribune, 2018). This format stalled after mass protests began in Sudan one month after the November 2018 Khartoum ministerial meeting, leading to a change in power.

Simultaneously to peace efforts by Sudan and other states, some Sahel countries extended a different kind of pressure on Libya by seeking anew intervention. The Dakar International Forum on Peace and Security held on 15-16 December 2014 with heads of state from Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Chad present acknowledged the fallout from the Libyan crisis as a major regional security threat, with some calling for France to intervene (ISS, 2015).

In early December 2014, the AU's Peace and Security Council initiated the

7. His next (and eventually successful) peace initiatives were extended towards South Sudan and the CAR.

Contact Group on Libya including the UN, EU, AU and North African states for diplomatic coordination of different formats (Anadolu Agency, 2014), which evolved into the Libyan Quartet (the UN, EU, AU and Arab League). As the AU itself was not able to take real charge and have an impact on Libya, it focused on not being omitted as part of international efforts. At the inauguration of the Contact Group, the UN Special Representative in Libya Bernardino Leon announced that an all-inclusive national dialogue for Libya would be initiated later that month. This proposal seemed a "copy-paste" formula taken from the Sudanese National Dialogue – a largely ceremonial, government-run exercise, promoted as a home-grown reconciliation process, discussed throughout 2014 and launched on 10 October that year.

The AU activities gained international visibility around 2019. Early that year, the AU proposed hosting the reconciliation conference on Libya ahead of the anticipated October 2019 elections. As elections were not organised, neither was the conference. Then, on 7 July 2019, the High-Level Committee during its Niamey meeting called for the appointment of a joint special envoy of the AU and the UN (Conclusions of the meeting of the African Union [AU] High Level Committee on Libya, 2019). This would merge the UN process – factually, the only one relevant – with the AU's and place the African body representative at the centre of decisions. Such a formula could have possibly been acceptable for Libyan factions. The efforts intensified after the resignation of the UN envoy Ghassan Salame, a Lebanese, in March 2020. The experienced AU diplomat, Algerian Ramtane Lamamra, was a strong candidate to replace him – eventually, his candidature was dropped after US objections. After him, the UN

Secretary General picked another African, Ghanaian minister Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, but this candidature also failed. Eventually, a consensual solution was found in late 2020, and Raisedon Zenenga, of Zimbabwe, was named Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) and mission coordinator to the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) with Slovak diplomat Ján Kubiš as new Special Envoy and Head of the UNSMIL.

The very assumption of the principle that Africa with its sub-Saharan component would offer a solution to the Libyan crisis – although natural if the AU's procedures are to be considered – was indeed revolutionary and reversed the deep-rooted clientelist relationship between the two sides. By seeking recognition of its own peace initiatives, then by – partially successfully – pushing for obtaining leading positions in the UN-led process, Africa steadily increased its footprint in Libya's peace process.

Sustainability

Since 2019, the structural conditions that favoured increasing sub-Saharan African agency in Libya have begun to change. The expansion of Haftar's territorial control brought some taste of a more unified rule and limited options for manoeuvring between factions. Then, the January 2019 march on the south and the April 2019 offensive on Tripoli, which witnessed the arrival of new Russian and Turkish boots (the latter massively employing Syrian mercenaries), raised the issue of foreign forces in Libya as an obstacle for lasting peace. The demand for their withdrawal would become central in the UN approach to support the new central Government of National Unity appointed in March 2021 under the leadership of Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, the

first unified authority for all of Libya since 2014. Moreover, the October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement for Sudan (JPA) offered most of the Darfuri factions a legitimate place within the Sudanese political system and prompted their return from Libya. Thus, those activities of sub-Saharan actors – be it governments, rebels or gangs – which benefited from Libya's lawlessness, were bound to decrease.

However, the very same actors would try to retain some of the newly-developed powers and influences. In the case of Sudan, despite the provisions of the security arrangements protocol to the JPA, which ordered the SLA/MM, the JEM, the Sudan Liberation Army-Transitional Council (SLA/TC), the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) and the Sudanese Alliance groups to return, there were indications that many of them were attempting to keep some forces inside Libya, possibly with a low profile. For non-signatory groups, political conditions have not changed, therefore staying in Libya continued to be natural (UNSC, 2021). By April 2021, the UN estimated approximately 10,000 Sudanese and (possibly) Chadian mercenaries, who strengthened their standing throughout the previous year, were still present in Libya (Al Jazeera, 2021). Moreover, the October 25, 2021 coup in Khartoum, supported by SLA/MM and JEM – which made them highly unpopular – raised questions about the mid-term sustainability of the entire JPA formula.

In 2020, Darfurian fighters in Libya – basically on Haftar's side – established direct contact with his main financial foreign backer, the UAE (UNSC, 2021). These new ties leave an open opportunity for them to modify their roles and to continue operating as Abu Dhabi's proxies. Troops and commanders find conditions in Libya better than in Sudan, therefore

are prone to continue as long as Haftar, in whatever capacity, or the UAE remain influential players on the ground. Wealth accumulated through rebels' criminal and business networks (including drug smuggling across Nigerien and Egyptian borders [UNSC, 2021]). offers their respective political bases in Sudan leverage in the pursuit of power within the transitional setting. Chadian rebels, after a failed raid by FACT, and doubts about whether the country's new leader Mahamat Déby "Kaka" would sustain his conciliatory approach (including a promise of talks with the armed groups and the November 2021 amnesty), would be similarly ambiguous when it comes to fully leaving Libya. In this respect, southern actors do not need to develop long-running, sustainable strategic and political goals in Libya to continue to be present, although an eventual crystallisation of the Tubu movement could offer such ideological ground for some of them. There are no indications that Libya's southern border would anytime soon, even after the long-anticipated national elections, fall firmly under a direct central authority. Rather it would continue to be controlled by local tribal forces which offer informal sub-Saharan African actors parts of the cake until an internationally-backed institution-building drive reaches the deep south.

On the other hand, space for the governments' meddling inside Libya decreased first with the territorial expansion of Haftar, then with the solidification of central authorities. Back in July 2017, Haftar expelled Sudanese consulate staff from Kufra on the grounds of the "damage for the Libyan national security" (Middle East Eye, 2017), which symbolically sealed the end of Sudan's buffer zone project.

The most solid gain for African states seems to be the diplomatic one. With the forthcoming establishment of UN oper-

ations inside Libya (UNSMIL, 2021), involvement of the AU's experts, and possibly troops, could have been anticipated. In this field, African agency – although limited – has the potential of becoming a permanent feature.

Policy recommendations for the EU

When projecting involvement in rebuilding Libya, the EU should act within a framework that sees its sub-Saharan neighbourhood as both part of the problem and part of the solution. While exit of the Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries is a must, their growing footprint on various industries – legal and criminal – is also a factor to reckon with. Institutional support for Libya in the coming years would require investing in border management, combating trafficking of drugs, professionalisation of the security sector, as well as creating frameworks for transparent gold extraction. As soon as those areas are firmly covered and regulated by the Libyan state, controversies around the presence of foreign actors will decrease. Otherwise, a potential backlash – like the wave of anti-African incidents after the fall of Gaddafi – could be explosive due to their cross-border and militant nature.

The EU should coordinate with and include sub-Saharan African actors in seeking diplomatic solutions, particularly to eliminate localised and transboundary threats to the stabilisation of Libya and the region. Libya's neighbours format is a particularly good platform to engage with in this regard.

The ongoing transitional process in Sudan facilitates the task of bringing all the Sudanese actors on board: at the time of writing, the country's expanded government already included, and the anticipated parliament was to include factions with an armed presence in Libya. Both the EU delegation to Sudan and the EU Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa could be helpful in coordinating with these groups to ensure that the nature of their further stay in Libya does not conflict with its peace and stabilisation. As for Chad, Mahamat Déby should be pressed to fulfil his initial declarations of reconciliation, which could potentially bring its Libya-based armed opposition groups back into the system. In Niger, the EU must avoid contributing to the side effects of its anti-migratory policies. As long as they strengthen the transboundary militant groups, achieving lasting stability in Libya would not be possible.

As the UAE's biggest trading partner, the EU should clearly state that Abu Dhabi must abide by the principle of withdrawal of all foreign forces from Libya and must not try to rebrand the sub-Saharan African mercenary presence in this country.

Conclusions

The decade of absence of the strong central state power, separation of southern Libya from the main theatre of the Libyan civil conflict, and development of locally-based but regionally connected southern dynamics produced a new context for sub-Saharan African actors. Multiple forms of their engagements contributed to the larger change of vectors of the flows of (in)security on the Libyan-sub-Saharan axis: in many aspects, Libya became subject to rather than a player. Simultaneously, sub-Saharan actors asserted significant agency: states and international institutions were able to

redesign perceptions and projections of Libya's overall stability and of local areas of influence, particularly in the borderlands. Governments attempted to build buffer zones and play proxy politics inside Libya. Armed groups exploited both lawlessness of Libyan peripheries and connections to the main protagonists of the Libyan conflicts. Criminal groups moved in to control local illicit trades. Even if many of those new engagements were casual, opportunistic, lacking sustainability or long-term vision, they still marked the birth of the new trend: for the first time in history, the sub-Saharan actors achieved the ability to effectively project and exercise power within Libya on a large scale while Libya ceased to play a similar role the other way around. While their motivations differed, rebels, militias, bandits, governments and international bodies based south of the Sahara all increasingly saw in their northern neighbour, formerly an influential powerhouse, a troubled vacuum zone to be filled. By doing so, they Africanised parts of the Libyan political and security theatre.

Paradoxically, this major change has largely gone unnoticed by the international community both in terms of adequately reading the local and regional dynamics and in the context of seeking relevant responses. Acknowledged or not, sub-Saharan African agency continues to be played out on the ground, thus constituting not only a significant part of the problem but also an offering a necessary part of the solution for Libya. Tackling widely discussed Middle Eastern, Turkish or Russian involvement on the East-West nexus alone would not be enough to reduce the problem of foreign meddling in Libya, and focusing on the UN's and EU's attempts to find a political way forward would strip the country of benefits from possibly valuable initiatives generated south of its borders. Better understanding and incorporation of sub-Saharan agency into the decision-making processes would not only help to turn the page on the decade of crisis but also to accommodate Libya not only within the Mediterranean or the Maghreb but also within Africa at large.

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