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Why the 'ignored war' in Libya will come to haunt a blinkered west

Europe seems unconcerned by the chaos smouldering on its doorstep, as the five-year-old conflict becomes world's main theatre of drone combat

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The most recent ally of Khalifa Haftar, the general who has been attacking the Libyan capital Tripoli since April last year, is Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

This union was formalised last week with the opening of a "Libyan embassy" in Damascus. The alarming partnership has been forged almost completely without comment. What happens with Libya no longer seems to concern anyone. It's as though the whole conflict has ceased to exist.

Libya is not the Middle East's forgotten war, it is the ignored war. Having burned for almost five years now, the country has almost entirely collapsed, a situation which minimal political will could have prevented. Not even the unprovoked attack of Tripoli was enough to inspire action. Last week there was a statement from the UK, the EU, the US, Tunisia, Algeria and others calling on the warring parties to call a truce to allow the country to tackle Covid-19.

Alas, the city remains the theatre of a "civil war" despite participation from no fewer than 10 other countries. A humanitarian disaster looms as more than two million people remain in the city, suffering daily shelling, failing electricity thanks to an oil blockade, and threats to cut off its water supply. All the while the attacking parties use terms such as "Aleppo" to describe the lengths they'll go to win this fight. The war that was often dismissed by policymakers as too-slow-burning-to-worry-about has now inflamed nearby hotspots, like the eastern Mediterranean, and looks likely to spread further still.

Europe seems unconcerned by the chaos and instability smouldering on its doorstep. The blind eye the western world is turning to Libya has allowed it to become the world's main theatre of drone combat, with the UAE and Egypt introducing Chinese-made drones to the field of Middle Eastern warfare. Not only does this undercut America's shortlived monopoly on military drone technology, it has also shown the world that Chinese drones, as well as other equipment such as guided artillery, are the cheap and effective alternative for proxy warfare. It is a foreboding symbol of the future of arms proliferation and the technological upgrade that smaller, regional conflicts are set to experience.

Libya has no shortage of prescience in warfare, but the use of different mercenary groups to fight in the country may just be the most disturbing development of them all. With active fighters from private military contractors such as Russia's Wagner Group, to rebel groups from Chad, Syria and those press-ganged by the UAE from Sudan – not to mention the multitude of special forces teams and "military advisers" – this is a dynamic that will have terrible consequences for decades to come. It should be a lesson for all about what the future will look like as middling powers run amok in the absence of any normative powers or forces, who remain too myopic to advance credible solutions.

At its core, Libya's war has been driven by the aspirations of regional powers, after its transition was hijacked and run aground by them. It is this dynamic that explains why the situation is deteriorating so rapidly and why the west is turning a blind eye to it. Khalifa Haftar is merely the local face of a regional project propagated from Abu Dhabi. His assault on the capital is the culmination of plans that began in 2014 for him to follow in the footsteps of Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. It is a crude attempt to put the Arab Spring genie back in its bottle, and although one can only speculate on the logic behind it, the ambition is clear for all to see.

But Libya is not Egypt, and this determination to shove a square peg into a round hole has only triggered a response from Turkey, which is adamant it will not allow the UAE to reshape the region in its own image. It is driving a dangerous race to the bottom, at an important intersection between the African and Arab worlds, and should be a wake-up call to those whose interests lie in stability.

A billboard depicting the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a member of Islamic State in the eastern Libyan port city of Benghazi. Photograph: Abdullah Doma/AFP

Unfortunately, those who recognise the need for fundamental change in the rentier region we call the Middle East, are isolated. The US has been absent under Donald Trump, who will never strain relations with his "favourite dictator" or the UAE over Libya while he has bigger, Iranian, fish to fry. Meanwhile, Europe has relied on the US for so long that its foreign policy muscles have atrophied. In spite of the best efforts of Germany, who tried to bring order to the international scrimmage over Libya, there is only so much it can do alone.

Despite pretensions of creating a geopolitical commission, EU states lack the unity, will and savvy to engage the Gulf and risk lucrative economic partnerships over a situation that has not yet become an existential crisis for them. Even the UN has found itself deeply undermined. Peace plans are upended and UN staff killed or intimidated by the Haftar project without so much as a word from a west that is unwilling to make things awkward with the Gulf.

If Libya continues to be the ignored war, the humanitarian cost will skyrocket, and the contagion of instability will continue through regions that are unable to contain it. If Syria's own tragic war augured how other powers would exploit the space left by a pivoting US, and Yemen's war symbolised the shifting west/Gulf dynamics, then Libya is the conflict where the past decade's geopolitical trends are coalescing to formalise the dystopia we're stumbling into and for the most part, we're none the wiser about it.

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