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## Libya Crisis bet. Paris initiative & Cairo role

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### Introduction

The French initiative is an attempt to find a political solution to the Libyan crisis based on the facts on the ground amid sharp differences between Libyan political leaders on the one hand and armed factions on the other. Also, the initiative reinstates the role of France as an international force responsible for the Libyan file.

This assessment tries to:

- 1) Highlight the objectives of the French initiative,
- 2) Discuss the possibility of its success in solving the Libyan crisis,
- 3) And explore the limits of the Egyptian regime's role in the crisis.

### First: France's 25 July initiative

On 25 July 2017 in France's La Celle Saint-Cloud at the invitation of President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron and in the presence of Ghassan Salamé, the special representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Libya, it was announced that Fayez Al Serraj, Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya, and Khalifa Haftar, commander of the so-called Libyan National Army have agreed to call a ceasefire and hold elections in Libya early next year.

### Joint Serraj-Hafter declaration

"In support of the action of the United Nations and in the framework of the implementation of the Skhirat Agreement, taking into account the initiatives of the international organizations working on Libya including the African Union, the European Union and the League of Arab States, and underlining the efforts made by Libya's friend

countries and partners in recent months, particularly Egypt, Algeria, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Tunisia and Italy,” France wanted to contribute to solving the Libyan crisis by hosting the Libyan rival leaders and presenting its peace initiative on Libya. This initiative “fully supports the role of the new Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Ghassan Salamé, who took part in the discussions on 25 July. France’s aim is to contribute to drawing up a political solution and helping the Libyans strengthen the Skhirat Libyan Political Agreement to make it more effective and inclusive.”

**In this context, the following declaration was adopted by the Libyan parties present:**

1. The solution to the Libya crisis can only be a political one and requires a national reconciliation process involving all Libyans, including the institutional, security and military actors who are prepared to participate peacefully, with the safe return of displaced persons and refugees and the creation of a transitional justice, reparation and national amnesty process as well as the implementation of Article 34 on security arrangements of the Libyan Political Agreement.
2. They commit to a ceasefire and to refrain from any use of armed force for any purpose that does not strictly constitute counter-terrorism, in compliance with the Libyan Political Agreement and international treaties, and in order to protect Libya’s territory and sovereignty and we strongly condemn all that threatens the stability of the territory.
3. They are committed to building the rule of law in a sovereign, civilian and democratic Libya that ensures the separation and peaceful transfer of powers and respect for human rights, and that has unified national institutions, such as the Central Bank of Libya, the National Oil Corporation and the Libyan Investment Authority. It should guarantee the safety of citizens, the integrity of the territory and the sovereignty of



the State and the proper management of natural and financial resources in the interest of all Libyans.

4. They are determined, supported by the impartial work of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, to make effective the Libyan Political Agreement of 17 December 2015 and to continue political dialogue building on the Abu Dhabi meeting of 3 May 2017.

5. They will make all efforts to support the consultations and work of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, which need to be the subject of inclusive political dialogue in which the House of Representatives and the High Council of State will play their full role.

6. They will continue their dialogue beyond La Celle Saint-Cloud meeting, pursuant to this declaration, and they commit to create conditions that are conducive to the work of the House of Representatives, the High Council of State and the High National Election Commission for the preparation of the upcoming elections.

7. They will make all efforts to integrate fighters who so wish into the regular forces and call for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the others into civilian life. The Libyan army will be made up of lawful military forces ensuring the defence of the Libyan territory in compliance with Article 33 of the Libyan Political Agreement.

8. They have decided to work on establishing a roadmap for the security and defence of the Libyan territory against threats and trafficking of all types. They will work so that all security and military forces present adhere to this plan in the framework of the reunification of the military and security institutions in order to coordinate in the fight against terrorism, control migration flows through the Libyan territory, secure and control borders, and combat organized criminal networks that instrumentalize Libya and destabilize the Central Mediterranean.

9. They solemnly commit to work towards the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections as soon as possible as from 25 July in cooperation with the relevant institutions and with the support and under the supervision of the United Nations.

10. They ask the United Nations Security Council to support the guidelines of this declaration, and the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to engage in the necessary consultations with the different Libyan actors.

It was also announced that France's aim was "to contribute to drawing up a political solution and helping the Libyans strengthen the Skhirat Libyan Political Agreement to make it more effective and inclusive." It was also declared that the meeting between Al-Serraj and Haftar in La Celle Saint-Cloud was a continuation of the meetings "already held at various levels in Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Algeria, taking up their consensual elements. It aims to foster sustained and inclusive inter-Libyan dialogue in which all actors in good faith have a role to play."

## **Second: the French initiative .. Why now?**

The meeting between Al-Serraj and Haftar in France was not the first meeting between the two sides, but it came after a series of meetings in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, which seemed to have paved the way for the meeting that took place in Paris on July 25, 2017 and resulted in the French initiative. It is noteworthy that there are no great differences between the items of the Paris declaration and the outcome of the Cairo meeting between Al-Serraj and Haftar, particularly in working to hold parliamentary and presidential elections not later than February 2018.

It seems that the new French president, Emmanuel Macron, seeks an active presence of the French foreign policy during his period of presidency through the recovery of France's role and influence in the North African region as a major player and

international guarantor, especially in the Libyan file, prompting the regional and international forces involved in the Libyan crisis to cooperate and coordinate with the French government.

On the other hand, the Gulf crisis appeared to increase and deepen the Libyan crisis as the conflict between the regional supporters of the Libyan parties has turned into a direct confrontation on the Libyan territory. It was clear from the beginning that Egypt and the UAE were taking advantage of the Gulf crisis to accelerate the steps of putting an end to the Libyan file in favor of their main ally in Libya, Khalifa Hafter. Soon after the initiative, Hafter announced that his forces have captured the city of Benghazi after fierce military operations.

### Third: France's real objectives

France's foreign policy concerning the Libyan crisis has not changed since the era of former French President Francois Hollande, as France has vital interests in Libya, including:

- Ensuring the continuation of the flow of natural gas and oil,
- Maintaining the fight against terrorism by securing the southern region of Libya,
- Securing the French military base 'Madama', in Niger, on the southern border of Libya, in order to cut off any military supplies from southern Libya to the armed groups in Mali, where France is engaged in military operations since 2013. This led France to cooperate with Khalifa Hafter and support him militarily to protect its interests in Libya. France has not been able to hide its support for General Hafter, especially after three French soldiers were killed during a mission near the city of Benghazi, east of Libya, in July 2016. This incident in particular confirmed the previous reports that referred to the French support to the forces of Hafter in their fight against opponents in Benghazi.



## Fourth: France, Italy, and the Libyan crisis

Although stopping the infiltration of illegal immigration across the Libyan coasts is the common interest of all European countries in Libya, however, it has been clear since the beginning of the Libyan crisis that there are some European countries have divergent visions on the way to resolve the crisis. The Italian government was annoyed by the France's intervention in the Libyan crisis through its peace initiative which crowds out the international Skhirat Libyan Political Agreement, backed by Italy. So, the French initiative may be the beginning of a political confrontation between France and Italy. At first, Rome expressed its dissatisfaction towards the French initiative; but several days later the Italian government announced a maritime operation in Libyan territorial waters for helping the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent the infiltration of immigrants at the request of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA).

## Fifth: The French initiative .. a solution or more complication?

Though the French initiative which is supposed to find national reconciliation between the conflicting parties in Libya, was limited to a meeting between Al-Serraj and Haftar, to be followed by holding elections that Al-Serraj had called for earlier, a few days before his meeting with Haftar in Paris.

In spite of the French initiative, it seems that achievement of genuine national reconciliation in Libya or securing fair electoral procedures will be extremely difficult, in light of Libya's complicated situation and the facts on the ground.

### The most important points that can hinder the initiative:

1- Focusing on Al-Serraj and Haftar only as active players in the Libyan arena is one of the most important factors that could complicate the Libyan crisis. The absence of important political and military forces and actors and the failure to embrace them in

such initiative, will not lead to the achievement of a national consensus before engaging in any electoral action.

2- The joint declaration in Paris excluded the military operations in the fight against terrorism from the agreed ceasefire. It does not appear here who are classified as 'terrorist' among the armed factions, which is likely to cause many crises in the light of the absence of a clear definition of terrorism.

3- Al-Serraj and Hafter are likely to face heavy pressures from their local partners and supporters. In addition to their inability to enforce the terms of the initiative, both al-Serraj and Hafter will face splits and loss of alliances if they go ahead with the initiative.

4- The events and comments that followed the announcement of the initiative do not indicate that there has been a change in the differences between Al-Serraj and Hafter. Immediately before they left Paris, a war of statements broke out between the two parties. In an official visit to Italy immediately after his visit to Paris, Al-Serraj asked for Italy's help for the Tripoli authorities in combating illegal immigration within the Libyan territorial waters. Accordingly, the Italian government announced the launch of a naval mission in Libyan territorial waters for combatting immigrant smugglers. This led to a sharp disagreement between Al-Serraj and Hafter who ordered his forces to face any naval parts in the territorial waters, referring to his objection to Al-Serraj's agreement with Italy.

### **Sixth: The Egyptian role in the Libyan crisis**

Despite Cairo's official declaration of supporting the Skhirat Political Agreement at the end of 2015, the Egyptian role continued to deepen the Libyan crisis. The Egyptian regime used to pressure for the non-activation of the Skhirat agreement terms. The Egyptian regime coordinated with more than one party in the Libyan equation. The Egyptian regime relied on two parallel tracks in dealing with the Libyan crisis:



- 1) The apparent support for the political track resulting from the Skhirat agreement and the Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Fayez Al-Serraj.
- 2) Maintaining the logistical, military and political support of General Khalifa Hafter and seeking to include him in the political process.

The Egyptian regime was keen on finding a political role for Hafter, especially after he had moved away from the political arena by insisting on the rejection of the internationally supported Skhirat agreement. Accordingly, Hafter hurried to declare the liberation of Beni Ghazi although the military operations in some pockets were still going on, to strengthen his position on the ground and impose himself at the negotiating table.

On the other hand, the French initiative was not far from Cairo understandings in February 2017 when Egypt hosted a meeting between Al-Serraj and Hafter, pushing for a political role for the latter. Three months later, the two sides met again in Abu Dhabi in the same context. So, the Al-Serraj-Hafter meetings in Cairo and Abu Dhabi seemed to have paved the way for an understanding between the two parties that led to the Paris meeting under the auspices of France.

A few days after the French initiative, Mahmoud Hegazi, the Chief of Staff of the Egyptian army at the time who was responsible for the Libyan file, met with Aqila Saleh, the spokesman of the Libyan House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk who did not attend the Paris meeting. After Hegazi's meeting with Saleh in Cairo, Hegazi stressed that the Libyan HoR is the only body mandated to take all the constitutional and legal measures to complete the political agreement in Libya, implicitly blocking the French initiative. This came in the context of the fact that the Egyptian regime used to obstruct any initiative for a political solution to the Libyan crisis, pushing for a military solution, which is fully consistent with the interests and orientations of the Egyptian regime.

## Summary

Despite the joint agreement announced by Al-Serraj and Hafter – which was mostly due to French pressures – however, no real ‘agreement’, in the political sense, was reached. Perhaps, General Khalifa Hafter was the only one who benefited from the French initiative by gaining international recognition as a political actor in the Libyan scene.

After France presented itself as an international supporter for resolving the Libyan crisis, it seems that the margins of the regional maneuvers will be reduced politically, which may be reflected in the political role of the Egyptian regime in the Libyan crisis. However, this will not cause a great loss to the Egyptian regime which agrees with the French vision on the Libyan crisis both politically and militarily. This means that the whole matter is only exchange of roles between Egypt and France on the Libyan crisis. In fact, France, as a strong international sponsor, gives political legitimacy to Hafter, while Egypt maintains providing logistical and military support to him.