

## **Libya peace deal must survive shift from Chateau to battlefield**

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**Paris:** A French-led effort to reunify fractured Libya failed to consult powerful local forces and risks achieving little beyond boosting the legitimacy of a renegade general who has recently racked up significant battlefield gains.

**French President Emmanuel Macron and General Khalifa Haftar, commander in the Libyan National Army (LNA) attend a press conference after talks aimed at easing tensions in Libya, in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, near Paris, on July 25, 2017. The two main rivals in conflict-ridden Libya are committed to a ceasefire and holding elections "as soon as possible", according to a draft statement released ahead of French-brokered talks today. The communique says Libya's UN-backed Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar, the military commander who controls the remote east of the vast country, accept that only a political solution can end the crisis./ AFP / JACQUES DEMARTHON**

On paper, the step taken by Libya's rival leaders on Tuesday guided by French President Emmanuel Macron and a United Nations envoy was their boldest yet toward resolving Libya's six-year crisis. After talks at a country mansion outside Paris, UN-backed Prime Minister Fayeze Sarraj and eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar agreed to a ceasefire, combining the North African crude producer's divided state oil company and holding elections as soon as possible.

Yet the accord will struggle to survive the transition from French chateau to Libya's fiercely contested politics, according to analysts including Riccardo Fabiani at Eurasia Group.

"All we have is a very good photo op, which Macron and Haftar exploited very well," said Fabiani, senior analyst for the Middle East and North Africa.

The agreement accorded Haftar a veneer of respect on the international arena a major achievement for a leader whose authority has so far been backed largely by Russia's Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

It was, though, reached without input from regional officials, or myriad militias and political parties whose cooperation will be needed to make it stick, he said.

Playing out just across the Mediterranean Sea, Libya's descent into chaos since the uprising that toppled Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 has fueled the two most severe cross-border challenges facing many European leaders the flow of poor migrants desperate to build better lives and the opportunist movement of Daesh extremists. Macron's initiative comes after abortive attempts by Italy, the former colonizing power, to forge a peace.

"Work Together"

While a UN-mediated peace deal was meant to unite Libya, Sarraj has struggled to expand his influence outside the capital since arriving in Tripoli in March 2016. Haftar's Libyan National Army controls large parts of the country from its base in the east, this month capturing the key city of Benghazi after years of fighting with Islamist militias and earlier Daesh militants.

"There is a political legitimacy that's in the hands of Prime Minister Sarraj and a military legitimacy that's held by General Haftar," Macron said as the deal was announced. "They have decided to work together on a

political process, on a security process, and for a unified economy that will benefit the Libyan people.â€•

Sarraj and Haftar met in Abu Dhabi in May for the first time since early last year. Initially hailed as a breakthrough, analysts said later the meeting was fruitless. Each side issued its own communique after the meeting, and battlefield developments in the south of Libya soon eroded any goodwill.

## **Italy Irritated**

With his military dominance now cemented, Haftar appears to have gone further in the talks at the Chateau de la Celle than he did in Abu Dhabi in a search for more political recognition from European countries, according to an aide to Macron.

Even so, itâ€™s unlikely to â€œbreach the political stalemateâ€• that has endured in Libya for years, said Oded Berkowitz, senior analyst for the Middle East and North Africa with geopolitical risk consultancy Max Security in Israel.

Haftar controls the main oil fields and ports, and his prominence now shows thereâ€™s international recognition that Haftar â€œhas to be involved in any political settlement,â€• he said. Heâ€™s now a â€œforce to be reckoned with.â€•

French officials said the goal of Tuesdayâ€™s meeting was to define general guidelines that would help the UNâ€™s Special Representative to Libya, Ghassan Salame, reach an agreement leading to elections next year. Macron saluted earlier efforts of countries such as Italy, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and the UAE. to seek a solution and said theyâ€™d all been involved in the preparations for the talks in France.

Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano, in an interview with the newspaper La Stampa published on Tuesday, had voiced his countryâ€™s irritation at Macronâ€™s initiative. Italy sees former colony Libya as part of its sphere of influence.

Italy and France have both been actively seeking a unified Libya because the disorder in the country has led to weapons flowing to Islamist militants in former French colonies in West Africa, such as Mali and Chad, and to human traffickers using Libyan beaches to ship migrants toward Italian shores.

â€œThe Libyan people need this peace, and the Mediterranean deserves this peace,â€• Macron said. â€œWe are directly affected.â€• In an interview with France 24 television, Sarraj said it was too early for him to decide whether or not to contest any election held under the plan. But while acknowledging there was much to do, he stressed real achievements. Haftar had agreed a ballot was the only way to solve the crisis and that the military must fall â€œunder a civilian executive authority,â€• he said.

â€œThe ball is in Haftarâ€™s court,â€• according to Berkowitz, who added that the military leader stood to gain the most from the declaration in France.

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