

Exclusive Read-out of the Interview of Dr. Sasha Toperich for Agenzia Nova (Italy)

By Alessandro Scipione

Dr. Toperich, what are your impressions? What is happening in Tripoli?

First of all, as you know, now is the month of Ramadan, so life's dynamic is different than usual. There were some quiet nights—but there were also some night where you could hear detonations and rounds of fire. Fighting resumes early afternoon. In fact, I visited Ein Aziziya (outskirts of Tripoli) which Haftar forces took earlier in his attack on Tripoli but were ultimately pushed out by government forces. In the distance one could see huge clouds of smoke, most likely from either plane or drone attacks. Soldiers are determined to repel Haftar's forces at any cost. Morale is high.

What about the city?

People go about their everyday lives. Certainly, there is an underlying fear and anxiety, but there is more anger on Haftar for not accepting the very fair agreement that he reached with Sarraj in Abu Dhabi. It is now irreversibly clear Haftar ultimately wants full power and control of the country. What Haftar underestimated is the current strength of unity of all political factions in Tripoli and in Misrata to repel his attack. Calculations by some that Misrata may not fully join to defend Tripoli were simply wrong. It became clear to Misrata that Haftar would for sure go against them if he conquered Tripoli. It would only be a matter of time. By accepting an agreement in Abu Dhabi and then rejecting it in launching a full-blown attack on Tripoli, Haftar's mask fell off. He wants to be a "new Gaddafi." Libyans are watching on TV repeatedly Haftar's order not to leave anyone alive at the battlefield, nor to take any prisoners of war, nor any wounded. This is horrifying indeed.

What about the East of the country?

I met with House of Representatives Members of Parliament from the East who now formed a new parliament in Tripoli. I met with folks who are from Benghazi as well. While I am careful not to make a statement on such matters without being on the ground—in this respect in Benghazi or Tobruk—people were saying there is 100% censorship in the East. You are in deep trouble if you speak up against Haftar's attack on Tripoli.

You wrote an article at the reputable The Hill online magazine in Washington D.C. that just went viral - "Haftar is no longer part of Libya's solution." Can you tell us what you think will happen?

I do not believe Haftar can win simply because most of the Libyans want democracy and the possibility to express themselves openly. They want freedom. Yes, there is huge corruption in the country, on all sides; there are many dirty political games that make people sick; the militia phenomenon in Libya made citizens suffer with kidnappings, constant fighting for control and influence; Fajr Libya and the effort of the Muslim Brotherhood to maintain power after losing the elections by burning the airport and forcing the diplomatic corps to leave the country was a major blow for all Libyans; the inactivity of the HoR in Tobruk that held perhaps only several official meetings in several years, and only those to discuss their salaries and other self-preserving issues while not accepting UN-brokered and internationally-recognized government in Tripoli... all this made Libyans feel desperate and bitter. However, at the end, the alternative of having another ruthless military ruler, one who will clearly make suffer those who oppose him, is not what Libyans will accept. This is the underlying message to the international

community. In the remote possibility Haftar does get to become a "new Gaddafi," we will see his rule short-lived. (And that not only because he is 75 years old, but because people would rise again, soon after).

Based on what do you offer such claim?

Look, Haftar already promised and gave control over mosques in Benghazi to Mekhdali's militia. Libya does not support Salafi Islam. This group already shamed Libyan people by desecrating graves and holy sites important to Libyans. They ruthlessly killed people. Haftar promised them control over mosques in Tripoli. Libyans will never go for it. Second, Haftar has started to tear apart the social and tribal fabric of Libya. This is very dangerous and will backfire on him, sooner or later. You now see split in Zintan and Warshefana tribes (and their militias), where parts support Haftar and parts support Sarraj. Haftar is imitating strategy that he used in Benghazi trying to use surrounding tribes around Tripoli to fight for him. Those who follow Libya closely will know that Nafussa mountain is not the green mountain, nor Zawiya Amarej and Misrata is not Bayda. Haftar is stuck and sees no way out. This is very bad. If he goes back to the East, what is the political solution after he broke every possible deal in the making? No, I think things have changed in Libya for good. And at best, it can be good for Libya. However, I worry how many innocent Libyans will be killed or displaced and how long would Libyans have to endure war. So, for now, I think unconditional cease fire is must.

But Imam from the East of Libya issued Fatwa for Haftar's soldiers to fight and not fast on this Holy month of Ramadan since they are "on Jihad," and Haftar appealed to his forces to fight strong.

Yes, and that says a lot, doesn't it? I think this is not war between "secular" and "Islamists" since there are such camps on both sides of political spectrum, in East, and in the West. This is the war over who controls vast resources in Libya; not just oil, but gold, and many other precious minerals and commodities Libya is rich with. So, to conclude, I would just say: let us call things to what they really are and not pretend to profess this as some differences in political ideology.

Italian PM Conte recently said that Italy "is not with Haftar nor with Sarraj, but it's with Libyan people." Some observers in Italy read this quote as a U-turn in favour of Mr Haftar. How do you read Italy's role in the Tripoli's crisis so far and what Rome could do to end this stall?

As I said earlier, there is a lot of "cheering" and various interpretations over any statements. I also feel to be with the Libyan people and that doesn't mean any "U-turn." Italy has an important and historic role in Libya and should use its influence to demand immediate cease fire and stronger EU action, including possibility of air strikes should the humanitarian situation in Tripoli worsen.

PM Sarraj said in interview with Italy's newspaper "Corriere della Sera" that 800.000 migrants could potentially reach Europe. How reliable are these numbers? Do you think Italy is risking a new migrant crisis?

That is a realistic assessment.

European Foreign ministries are gathering today in Brussels and Libya will be on top of the agenda. PM Sarraj is also in Brussels, after he toured Rome, Berlin, Paris and London last week. What are your expectations on a strong EU stance against Haftar's behavior?

I hope EU learned its mistake of a divided stance from the wars in the Balkans. It was only when the US intervened that the war ended. They should not repeat the same mistake.