1. Covid-19 and Libya's Tragedy of the Commons

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The Covid-19 pandemic has overwhelmed some of the most developed and technologically advanced healthcare systems worldwide, in addition to threatening the global economy. It has also triggered a tilt towards more autocratic policy options as even some of the most democratically leaning states have faced challenges in terms of securing the compliance of their populations to preventative social distancing measures. In the MENA region, states' pre-existing vulnerabilities in the economic, social, and political spheres have also been exacerbated. The region's governing authorities' have either failed the test of wielding tools of governance as their public health response foundered or are likely to retain and usurp the special powers they have deployed to contain the spread. Libya, a divided state that has been decaying for the past nine years, is likely to be the theater of an idiosyncratic combination of both scenarios.

Libya's healthcare system, already frail and underdeveloped during the Gaddafi era, has experienced continuous deterioration over the years that followed the revolution. The country was thus, by design, particularly vulnerable to a severe Covid-19 outbreak. Without doubt, the contemporary spread of the virus is having devastating public health implications, with health facilities across the country being already overwhelmed.[1] The

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[1] S. Creta, "Libyan Doctors Battle On Two Dangerous Fronts: Covid-19 And

pandemic has also negatively affected the country's political economy and has exacerbated pre-existing social rifts that had already been laid bare by the civil war ignited by General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) with the launch of an offensive on Libya's capital - Tripoli - in April 2019. Amidst an already precarious situation characterized by scarcity of resources and supply shortages, Covid-19 has also brought to light institutional cracks that put populations such as migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people (IDPs) – already at the margins of service delivery – in even more vulnerable positions.

Libya's first case of Covid-19 was identified on 24 March, 2020. Though the magnitude of the spread was somewhat limited in the first two months that followed, cases have exponentially increased since July, with over 29,000 total cases being reported in September 2020 as per Libya's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Of these, 460 have died and some 15,913 have recovered.[2] Yet, official statistics do not accurately reflect the real number of cases, which are likely underreported owing to limited testing capacities. Monitoring the outbreak in Libya is particularly challenging: a little under 50,000 tests have been conducted, with over half of these being in Tripoli. Despite the number of Covid-19 laboratories having expanded from five laboratories in four municipalities in May to 15 across eight of Libya's municipalities in August, the increased geographic reach of testing capacity has failed to translate into improved containment strategies. Aside from the dearth in testing, which has hampered efforts to track the spread of the virus, citizens' unwillingness to comply with containment procedures and curfews has also catalyzed the proliferation of cases.[3]

War", *The New Humanitarian*, June 2020.

[2] *Libya Coronavirus: 5,232 Cases And 113 Deaths - Worldometer, Worldometers Info*, September 2020.

[3] Health Sector Libya, "Libya: Health Sector Bulletin (July 2020)", *reliefweb*, August 2020.

Yet, despite its increasingly devastating socio-economic and health impact, Libyans' experience with Covid-19 has unfolded almost in a world of its own, barely impacting the Libyan civil war and its dynamics. Instead, civilians across the country bear the brunt of the virus' spread as authorities governing their areas fail to govern and usher in an appropriate public health response. Ominously, the spread of the pandemic has also occurred against the backdrop of an unprecedented internationalization of the Libyan conflict, with foreign powers more directly involved in driving the conflict than ever before. However, instead of triggering a concerted diplomatic effort to bring an end to the protracted violence, the concomitance of the virus' spread with the globalization of the "civil" war has compounded Western indifference towards the North African country and undermined prospects for a peaceful resolution of its citizens' plight. As a global black swan event, the pandemic has also exacerbated domestic and international actors' tendency to pursue policy choices driven by self-interest and zero-sum calculations at the expense of local populations. The result is, quite literally, the war equivalent of a *tragedy of the commons*, a scenario in which neither Libya's political elite nor their proxy backers are likely to win, but where Libyans definitely lose as disease and violence ravages their country.

Western Indifference, Oil Politics and Covid-19

The internationalization of Libya's war since the launch of Khalifa Haftar's offensive beginning 4 April 2020 on the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) has had an impact on the ability and willingness of Libya's authorities to respond to the pandemic. The surprise offensive, green-lit by Washington[4] and launched days before a UN-brokered Libyan national conference was organized, has placed Libya at the center of several overlapping geopolitical rivalries. Western complacency

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[4] D. Kirkpatrick, "The White House Blessed A War In Libya, But Russia Won It", *The New York Times*, 14 April 2020.

in the face of a potential Libyan relapse into authoritarianism under Haftar betrayed a degree of duplicity permeating the foreign policy apparatus of most Western countries. The failure to condemn the attack – let alone act against it – provided Turkey the opportunity to exert disproportionate leverage on the GNA, which it intervened to protect against Haftar, and more importantly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Moscow also capitalized on the West's indifference to scale up its military presence in Libya by transferring jets and mercenaries to support the LAAF.[5] In this kaleidoscopic landscape, Covid-19 is but an added layer of complexity that – while having devastating impact on Libya's socio-economic conditions – has not tapered the forces driving its conflict.

The ability of Libya's domestic actors to pursue their zero-sum calculations and drive their own country to ruin in the process has been afforded by the unabated military support which they have received from their international backers. The outbreak of Covid-19 has not diminished this trend, contributing instead to its exacerbation. Overall, the pandemic was, by and large, perceived as a window of opportunity by proxy powers, one which they sought to utilize to advance their foreign policy agenda against their adversaries in Libya. Indeed, even while Libya's main proxy meddlers – such as the UAE, Turkey, and Russia – were domestically grappling with the virus' spread, they significantly escalated their foreign-operated airstrikes as well as their transfers of weapons and mercenaries to Libya. Yet, despite Libya's military and political spheres gradually becoming the battleground for these meddlers to settle scores, they preferred direct intervention over propping up the capabilities of their local allies.[6] In that sense, while the dimensions and manifestations of the Libyan conflict grew more international,[7]

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[5] U.S. Department of Defense – AFRICOM, *Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement In Libya*, July 2020.

[6] E. Badi, "Covid-19 and Proxy Conflict: The Case of Libya", *Proxy Wars Initiative*, May 2020.

[7] W. Lacher, *The great carve-up: Libya's internationalised conflicts after Tripoli*, SWP

this did not translate into improved governance capabilities or a better public health response by domestic parties, which prioritized the war effort instead.

In addition, the global economic downturn that the pandemic has spurred, coupled with a drop in global oil prices, has also affected the behavior of local and international actors in the Libyan theater. Foreign meddlers ironically intensified their interventionism in Libya at the same time they experienced a surge of cases and were confronted with economic woes back home. Depending on their geostrategic calculations and perceived opportunity costs, foreign actors disregarded the financial burden of their involvement or the reputational risks their actions may engender. For instance, the Turkish lira's depreciation did not act as a deterrent for Turkey's military entrenchment in Western Libya, a momentum which grew more apparent after the GNA's capture of Wutiya airbase in late May. Similarly, in July, the UAE – conspiring with Moscow – also wilfully disrupted a US-backed deal that would have seen Haftar's six-month long blockade on Libyan oil exports lifted.[8] In other words, the pandemic prompted middle powers to capitalize on Western indifference to pursue expansionism; a policy choice achieved at the expense of Libya's socio-economic wellbeing. This further hampered the ability to coordinate a public health response, putting the onus on Libya's divided, corrupt, feeble, and contending governing authorities to organize it themselves.

Dysfunctional and Divided Response

The confluence of these geopolitical calculations played into Libyan parties' decision to shun German efforts to broker a ceasefire following the Libya-related Berlin Summit of January 2020. The United Nations' Secretary General appeal

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Berlin, June 2020.

[8] "Libya's NOC accuses UAE of being behind oil blockade", *Reuters*, 12 July 2020.

for a global ceasefire to help unite efforts to fight Covid-19 in vulnerable countries in early March also fell on deaf ears. Instead, both the Government of National Accord (GNA) and authorities in eastern Libya – the House of Representatives, the Interim Government, and the LAAF – attempted to put in place curfews, closed educational institutions, and launched modest awareness campaigns to encourage social distancing in their respective areas of control, preferring a dysfunctional and divided response over a nationally-coordinated effort.

In Western Libya, the GNA was swift to create a US$358 million fund to combat the outbreak in March, but it did not specify where it would spend the funds, nor did it outline a viable crisis management plan. The LAAF securitized the response to the pandemic by creating a Covid-19 committee headed by figures aligned with Khalifa Haftar, including his chief of staff. The LAAF committee was more concerned with stifling criticism over shortcomings in the public health response than with containing the spread.[9] However, in their attempts to compartmentalize their divided public health response from their respective mobilization for war, these actors undermined the former while prioritizing the latter. Perhaps no image captures the contradiction better than one taken by Egyptian-Canadian photographer Ammru Salahuddien, which shows a GNA fighter in Tripoli's frontline holding his rifle while wearing a surgical mask. In line with the tragedy of the commons, domestic parties, egged on by their international backers, pursued narrow self-interests, inadvertently self-sabotaging their own country in the process.

In many respects, the pandemic has become merely another facet of Libya's conflict. Across the Libyan territory are various vulnerable populations, not in the least citizens in Western Libya, particularly those in Tripoli. Others vulnerable segments of society include migrants, refugees, IDPs, women, and

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[9] F. Wehrey, *Libya And Coronavirus - Coronavirus In Conflict Zones: A Sobering Landscape*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 April 2020.

children, all of which have faced several constraints in their ability to take precautionary measures against the virus owing to the ongoing war. Between 1 January and 30 June 2020, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has documented hundreds of civilian casualties due to airstrikes, ground clashes, and shelling. Eighty percent of these casualties have been attributable to the LAAF, with many civilian returnees dying from the explosion of landmines left by Haftar's forces and Russian mercenaries before they retreated from Tripoli's suburbs towards Sirte and Jufra in June of 2020.[10] Explosive ordinance has constrained citizens' ability to access basic supplies and services, but also severely hampered humanitarian organizations attempting to reach Libya's at-risk populations. The geographic expansion of the conflict towards Tarhuna, and subsequently towards Sirte, has also generated waves of IDPs that are highly vulnerable to an outbreak.

More broadly, health facilities in both LNA and GNA-held territories lack the human and technical capacity to deal with the contemporary outbreak, with testing capabilities limited across the country as cases soared in July. In keeping with its track record of abysmal governance, the GNA mismanaged the crisis response, appointing notoriously corrupt figures with no public health background to contain the spread. Moreover, lack of medical equipment at hospitals due to protracted import restrictions has also led to some medical staff boycotting their shifts at hospitals in fear of contracting the virus. Health infrastructure has also not been spared the effects of war: on 7 April 2020, Al Khadra Hospital, a 400-bed facility in Tripoli that was tasked with treating Covid-19, was momentarily evacuated due to shelling by Haftar's LAAF.[11] Indeed, the latter seemingly weaponized global preoccupation with the pandemic to scale up attacks on civilian suburbs in Tripoli. This behaviour has also galvanized other armed actors into taking control

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[10] UNSMIL, *Civilian Casualties Report - 1 April - 30 June 2020*, July 2020.

[11] "Eastern Libyan forces attack Tripoli hospital for second day", *Associated Press*, 7 April 2020.

over utilities as a tool for collective punishment or a means of bargaining. In April 2020, at a time where access to water is the most basic requirement for precautionary measures against Covid-19, a forced closure of the southern pipelines of the Great Man-Made River project by an armed group cut water to over 3 million people in Western Libya.[12]

Much like in other countries, both of Libya's authorities initially announced a suspension of all travel to and from Libya. In practice, the sudden decision left hundreds of Libyan citizens stranded in airports across the world. These citizens were brought home in May through a generously funded – but badly executed – GNA repatriation plan which flew citizens to Libya's East and its West. Soon after, Covid-19 cases began gradually increasing in Northern Libya, and a large cluster of cases was discovered in the Southern city of Sebha in late May. Southern Libya – dubbed the Fezzan – is a historically marginalized region which neither of Libya's authorities possesses genuine legitimacy and control over. Neither the GNA nor the Haftar-aligned authorities focused on identifying virus cases across populations in the Fezzan, and their prioritization of the military build-up in Central Libya *de-facto* prevented the implementation of sustainable lockdowns in their areas of control, let alone in the sparsely populated South. The discovery of Libya's first cluster of Covid-19 cases in Sebha essentially spoke to the dysfunctionality characterizing the country's divided public health response and the tragedy of those at its margins. To make matters worse, instead of prompting Eastern and Western-based authorities to shift course and cooperate on managing the crisis, the event was used as part of pro-LAAF and pro-GNA media outlets' war propaganda campaigns in which each party accuses the opposing one of being responsible for spreading Covid-19 inside the country.

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[12] "In Libya, water cuts add to misery of conflict and coronavirus", *Reuters*, 8 April 2020.

All in all, Libya's national-level authorities have not passed the litmus test of governance that the Covid-19 crisis has presented. Both have squandered lavish funds while failing to procure testing and medical supplies, let alone devise appropriate containment measures and sustainable lockdown strategies. The lack of transparency that has characterized the securitized response of the LAAF's and GNA's bungled measures has fuelled the spread of destabilizing rumours, a factor which has undermined Libyan citizens' willingness to comply with social distancing measures across the country. Worsening living conditions are exacerbating social discontent, with fuel shortages and daily electricity cuts of more than 15 hours a day also straining the capacity of decaying health facilities.[13] Inflation and lack of liquidity are also forcing prolonged periods of social contact as lines for cash and limited costly basic supplies have become increasingly common. If the spread of the virus is to be contained, it will be by neither the national authorities nor their foreign backers, but by local constituencies and – potentially – decisionmakers and armed groups affiliated with them.

Covid-19 Remodels Local-National Relationships

What is already being witnessed because of the dysfunctional response of national authorities to the virus' spread is a fracturing of the tenuous relationships that existed between a self-serving political elite and local communities. National authorities' failure to govern had almost become an accepted reality across Libya, however, the spread of Covid-19 is not an event the country's populace can merely endure or wait out without reaction. Already, calls to protest governing authorities' abysmal response are gaining traction. Moreover, what is often omitted about the Libyan landscape is that, despite the country's

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[13] T. Megerisi, "A Libya Story: Pandemic And Human Rights In Times Of Conflict", *Open Democracy*, 4 May 2020.

social fabric having been torn apart by perpetual turmoil, familial bonds are still extremely strong. The fact that Libya's median age is around 28 years means that these bonds will not be spared by Covid-19. Indeed, cases of community spread are likely to increasingly involve young adults acting as pathogen vectors that will infect parents and grandparents. In that sense, higher authorities' incompetent response to the pandemic will represent an affront to family links. In the worst cases, the governments' ineptitude will manifest itself as tragedies that will be felt inside Libyan homes. This will fuel social discontent, catalyzing both the GNA's and the LAAF's loss of legitimacy while communities opt to mobilize independently at the grassroots level to contain the spread. In other words, while bringing the governance and legitimacy deficit of national authorities to light, Covid-19 will also reconfigure relationships between local stakeholders and national authorities, with the former growing more autonomous against the backdrop of the latter's gradual loss of popularity.

How successful this forced devolution of authority is at tapering the spread will depend on several factors, not least being how cohesive the community is in these locales. Indeed, tightly knit communities will likely fare better at collectively committing to social distancing measures and at grassroots mobilization. Depending on the context, this will be organized by local governance units such as municipalities, informal social and tribal councils, or even trusted community leaders. Indeed, these stakeholders' accountability and proximity to their constituencies outmatches that of any national-level structure. Yet, despite their best efforts, Libya's centralized governance paradigm dictates that these actors will be constrained by national authorities' policies anyway. While they may choose to organize locally, they will still depend – to a degree – on resources allocated by the central governments and on the coherence of the policies they adopt. In the best-case scenario, this dependence will prompt these actors to demand mechanisms for better cooperation or distribution of funds

from the GNA and the Eastern-based authorities. However, a more likely scenario is that this would prompt a resurgence of localism that would manifest itself as entire cities and towns closing themselves off to the rest of the country while hoarding resources to protect their own constituencies.

Whether the virus' spread triggers coerced decentralization or protectionist localism, the dislocation of linkages between the local and the national level presents an opportunity for Libya's panoply of local armed groups.[14] Indeed, either of these two scenarios would be used for these armed actors to present themselves as essential partners for Covid-19 response, whether by cooperating with national authorities or contending with them. Some of these hybrid armed actors are already redefining their raison d'être as enforcers of curfews, an activity through which they are deriving funds by collecting fines and imposing taxes on merchants transporting equipment through their areas of control. As the crisis protracts, others could leverage the relationship of dependency between them and national authorities to divert resources, medical equipment or worse, obtain official mandates that will grant them special powers and under a veneer of legitimacy which they are likely to retain in the long run. Some of Libya's armed actors in coastal towns will once again reconvert themselves into counter-migration partners, especially as Europe's obsession with deterring migration from Libya is exacerbated by the possibility that migrant populations fleeing the North African country may be carrying the virus. In sum, the spread of Covid-19 in Libya is likely to compound the fragmentation of its atomized security sector regardless of the policies adopted to contain the spread.

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[14] E. Badi, *Coronavirus in Libya: The Contagion of Instability*, ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 7 May 2020.

Conclusion

Libya's conflict was already an internecine struggle before Covid-19 gripped the North African country and brought its citizens more suffering. As elsewhere in the MENA region and beyond it, the pandemic is laying bare the shortcomings of governing authorities and is aggravating pre-existing political, social, and economic trends. However, nowhere else in the world did the pandemic merely dovetail as an added shade of desolation in an already depressing canvas. The fact that even the real prospect of widespread contagion and pestilence is failing to bring Libya's war to a halt speaks to the extent to which it has become a conflict driven by domestic and international actors that have little to no regards for the needs and aspirations of the country's own citizens. Egged on by opportunistic proxy meddlers, Libya's political elite has once again abdicated its responsibility to govern in favour of plundering state coffers and pushing for war. However, in pursuing cynical machinations driven by zero-sum calculations, they are rendering themselves irrelevant to their international backers while losing whatever negligible social legitimacy they possessed amongst local constituencies.

The result is an idiosyncratic situation – a war-equivalent of a *tragedy of the commons* – where Libya's proxy meddlers drive the country to ruin as they intervene to prolong an unwinnable war their local allies have become insignificant to. Ironically, by wilfully wasting the opportunity to devise functionable policies to address the spread of the virus, Libya's competing national authorities are also becoming irrelevant to governance altogether. While the flawed public health response to the pandemic is in line with Libyan authorities' abysmal track record in service provision and crisis management, the social and economic fallout from the virus' spread on Libya's society is likely to force some change in governance. Depending on the locale, this will either force decentralization or trigger protectionist localism – both processes which Libya's wide array

of armed actors will seek to capitalize on. In a twisted turn of events, the pandemic's similar devastating effects across the Libyan territory will highlight that the entirety of the country suffers from structural deficiencies, an event that will challenge the long-running idea that partitioning the North African state may resolve its long-standing tribulations. Nevertheless, brought together by the shared misery inflicted upon them by proxy powers and institutional sclerosis, Libyans will have no choice but to disrupt the *status quo*.