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Disinformation as a destabilizing
factor in Libya

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Disinformation as a destabilizing factor in Libya

Abstract:

The situation in Libya since 2014 represents a turning point in the political, military and social fragmentation of the country. In this context, and with the General Khalifa Haftar's Tripoli Operation Liberation, many actors have taken part in the conflict and an information war has started, where propaganda and disinformation are spread across social media to further destabilise and divide the country.

Keywords:

Libya, Disinformation, propaganda, international actors, Haftar, energetic and natural resources, Twitter, Facebook and social media

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Introduction

Currently, Libya remains in a state of indisputable division. The competing actors who fight to increase their power are the influential primary actors and the powerful social substructures (i.e. Tribes in Libya and influential, apolitical people) whose transitory nature is part of the Libyan social order. As a result, one might assert that, since Gadhafi's fall and the 2014 elections, the variations and shifts in the relations of power are constant.

As a consequence, it can be argued that the main actors could have instrumented political propaganda campaigns based on dubious information in order to encourage the public followers of each faction, while at the same time spreading fake news to reduce their respective power.

With regards to social media, this is used a convenient communication tool as well as a facilitator of "multiple" realities, which may be employed to further the strategic objectives of the opposing sides and their respective allies.

In this way, the present analysis tries to investigate the possible existence of disinformation campaigns with strategic purposes within Libya. Moreover, it expects to know if, under the current conditions, Libyan citizens and the rest of the actors have an alternative to obtain sufficiently reliable information.

Libya, a complex reality

The socio-political context since 2014

Libya represents a tumultuous scenario in which the international implications are at the core. This is due to the amount of both endogenous and exogenous actors in the country. In fact, all of these actors look to secure a strong position in Libya either for political, or economic motivations. Moreover, one must not forget the geostrategic position of Libya, between Europe and Africa, as well as its condition as an Arab country and its wealth in hydrocarbons.

When examining Libya, it is essential to avoid applying a Western-centric viewpoint in all its aspects (political, social, economic and military). Therefore, to understand this analysis and the context of Libya it is crucial to keep in mind the Arab worldview and, especially, that of Libya, where the tribal system is at the epicentre of their society.

Understanding tribal actors in Libya is necessary in order to explain the conflict; one must acknowledge their active role in disinformation, as they exemplify the complex dynamics within the country between the belligerent sides. In Libya there are around 140 tribes with different idiosyncrasies and traditions¹. Indeed, rules and codes of loyalty, obedience, and fidelity to the leader are followed by the population, which at times shapes the political and social system.

Nevertheless, one of the key determinants in Libya's situation is its political fragmentation since the invalidation of the 2014 elections and the latest "Libyan Political Agreement" that took place in 2015². Since then, there have been two governments. The Tripoli³ government with the Government of National Agreement, supported by the United Nations (UN), whose leader is Fayez al-Serraj; and the Tobruk government⁴, loyal to the Al-Baida government and with the support of the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar.

In addition, it should be pointed out that this political fragmentation is not simply an ideological struggle but rather a fight for the control of hydrocarbons, since Libya is one of the largest oil economies on the African continent⁵.

Finally, the principal observation of the Libyan situation is the complexity of the conflict, which is multifaceted and is the result of various causes, namely: the activity of national

¹ SOTO REYES, J. "La distribución del poder en la Libia post Gadafi: un análisis desde la Sociología del poder", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, pages .6, 7th of July 2017, available in <https://doi.org/10.15366/reim2017.23.0004>

² Libyan Political Agreement was signed in Morocco auspice by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

³ Tripoli is the capital city of Libya, located in the Tripolitania region (NW of the country).

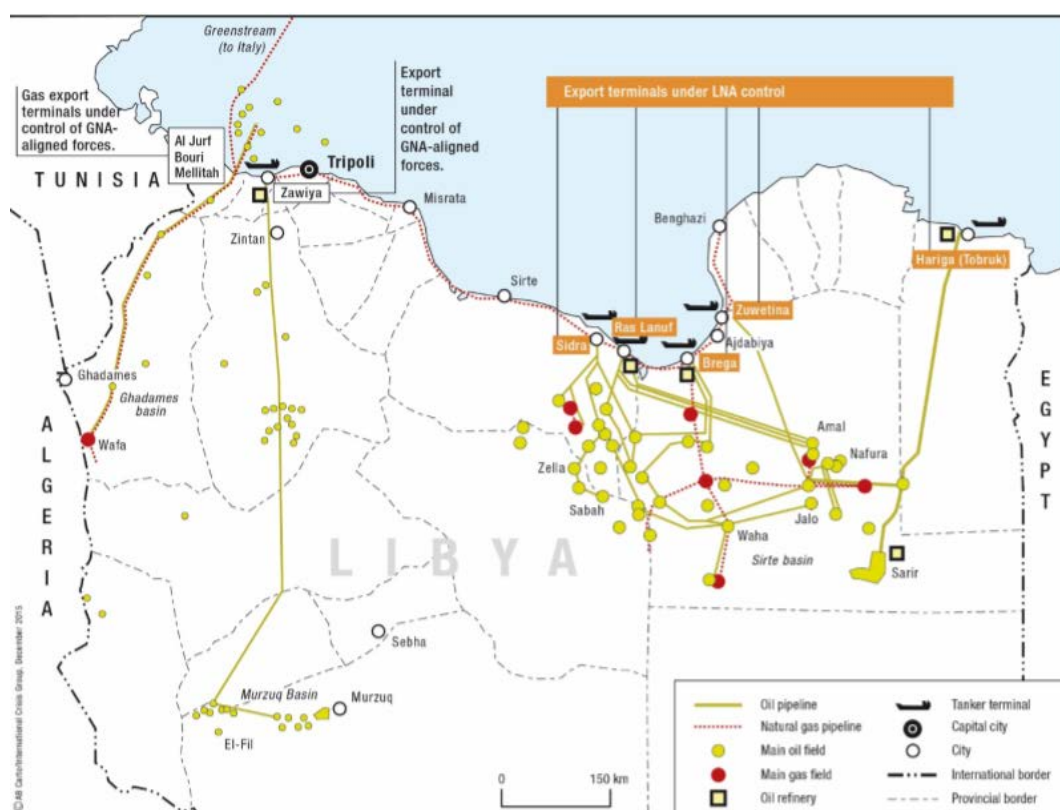
⁴ Tobruk is a Libyan city, located in the Cyrenaica region (NE of the country).

⁵ CHOSSUDOVSKY, M. "Operación Libia y la batalla por el petróleo: Rediseño del mapa de África", *Global Research*, 9 march 2013, available in <http://www.globalresearch.ca/operation-libya-and-the-battle-for-oilredrawing-the-map-of-africa/23605>

and international actors with opposing interests, the use of disinformation and propaganda as destabilizing tools, and the effect of Libya's complex tribal society.

Motivations and actors

To give a glimpse of the extreme complexity of the Libyan environment and present a succinct picture of the multiplicity of actors and competing interests, it suffices to consider the political division of the country (the government of Tripoli and government of Tobruk), the geographical division of its provinces (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and El Fezzan), as well as taking into consideration the tribes that are settled in Libya and the large amount of energy resources (oil, gas and uranium) and natural resources (gold and water) that the territory holds.



If one looks at the key geostrategic points, there is Tripoli (Northwest), the province of Cyrenaica (East) and El Fezzan (South West). First, Tripoli is the hub for hydrocarbon exports (extracted from the south) due to the proximity to the ports located in Sabratha. Second, Cyrenaica is an area with a high concentration of oil distribution terminals (Gulf

of Sirte), located in Azzuwaytinah, Al Brayqah, Ras Lanuf and Al Sidrah. Likewise, it is important to highlight the relevance of Cyrenaica as an abundant source of mineral water. Finally, the importance of El Fezzan results from the existence of oil wells and the extraction of concentrated uranium, located in the city of Sabha. In addition, the area around the Tibesi Mountains stands out. Mainly the Teda tribe, holding large reserves of gold, controls it⁶.

Regarding the main endogenous (national) actors in Libya, we can identify the Tobruk government with General Khalifa Haftar, the Zintan Militia, the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Tubu tribe. On the opposing side are the Tripoli government led by Fayed al-Serraj⁷, the Misrata Militia and the Tuareg tribe. Furthermore, the exogenous actors in the conflict further enforce this notion of geostrategic rivalry at the political, economic and military level.

Amongst the supporters of Haftar are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, France and Russia. Saudi Arabia – who supports Haftar’s cause politically – seeks to fulfil a key ambition to increase its control of ports and airports in neighbouring countries through his victory. This would benefit the Gulf State as a heavy exporter of hydrocarbons. Moreover, Haftar benefits from the logistical-military support of Egypt due to the substantial Libyan investments in the country, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who seek to curb the control of Islamists over hydrocarbons⁸. Similarly, France supports Haftar for anti-terrorism purposes, though with particular interest in the instability of French trade in Libya. Russia pursues the long-term goal of expanding its presence in Africa.

On the other hand, Serraj and the Government of National Agreement (GNA) have the political and military support of Qatar and Turkey, with the argument of putting an end to

⁶ ZAPITA, S. “Libya remains the main source of destabilization of Sahel countries: a report”, *Libya Herald*, 27 June 2017, available in: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/27/libya-remains-the-main-source-of-destabilization-of-the-sahel-countries-a-report/>

⁷ President of the GAN government (National Agreement Government)

⁸ SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, “Information warfare in Libya: the online advance of khalifa Haftar”, *Centro studi internazionali y Culture digital media*, page 11, May 2019, available in: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Information%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzi-7hEjs8fJXNs0T4HDx22LXhMxQ6tZloP3ezl28E17haIDjJHWQCc

the 'terrorism'⁹ of Haftar and its allies. In addition, this side has the support of Italy, whose great interests in the east of the country are chiefly motivated by the oil industry. Finally, the United States remains officially neutral despite having held talks with Haftar.

Thus, the current situation in Libya involves both endogenous and exogenous actors. With such multiplicity of actors, political positioning, arms supply, propaganda, and disinformation, it is impossible to take joint action to end the crisis in the country¹⁰.

Propaganda and disinformation in Social Media

This section will explore disinformation and propaganda in social media to build further understanding of the case study of Libya.

Social media is an inexhaustible source of information for consumption. For this reason, it has become one of the world's dominant political communication tools, albeit one that must be viewed with a certain distrust. Due to the functionality of social media as the preferred platform for enabling communication, we must consider that technology companies have the power to pursue mental and social reengineering activities, with the implication being the ability to influence the local and global population¹¹.

It has been demonstrated that the Digital Age has brought social transformation in much of the world, especially in North African and the Middle East¹². It is estimated that by

⁹ In these terms, labeling a terrorist side legitimizes "fully" its action against it despite being a truthful fact or not.

¹⁰ SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, "Information warfare in Libya: the online advance of khalifa Haftar", *Centro studi internazionali y Culture digital media*, page 11, May 2019, available in: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Information%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzi-7hEjs8fJXNs0T4HDx22LXhMxQ6tZloP3ezl28E17haIDjJHWQCc

¹¹ Social Media Disinformation and 'fake news': Interim Report, disponible en: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/363/363.pdf>

¹² FADI Salem, "The Arab world online 2017: digital transformations and societal trends in the Age of the 4th industrial revolution", *Mohammed Bin Rashid school of government & Mohammed Bin Rashid al Maktoum global initiatives*, pages 1-63, available in <https://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/d01358ac-8557-4954-b27f-95ddc5caef5f/TheArab-World-Online-2017>

2021, in the Arab region, there will be around 160 million users of social media¹³. In light of this, it would be advisable to implement security measures to deter the spread of propaganda and / or disinformation campaigns across social networks.

As an example of the considerable impact that could result from disinformation in democratic and non-democratic states, we can examine so-called psychological operations (PSYOPS) in Libya. NATO defines them as "the set of psychological activities planned in peace, crisis and war, aimed at enemy, friendly and neutral audiences to influence attitudes and behaviours that affect the achievement of military and political objectives¹⁴.

This set of psychological operations, with the intention of influencing the population, has always been one of the most popular techniques applied during periods of instability. In addition, apart from the tools of disinformation and propaganda currently being disseminated through social media, the creation of a parallel reality generated through deception and the distortion of information is also pursued. The population is both used as a recipient of this information, but also as a vessel for its propagation, hence there is a multiplicative effect.

Therefore, while it is true that PSYOPS encompass more than just propaganda, propaganda does have a pre-eminent role, especially with relevance to social media. Propaganda is "information, ideas, doctrines or appeals diffused with the purpose of influencing the emotions, opinions, attitudes or behaviours of an audience to a certain objective for the benefit of the one who performs it"¹⁵. It is considered that the effectiveness of propaganda increases when it is based on a strong knowledge of the conditions and attitudes of the receiving audience, when credible and truthful information is used, and when using attractive information for the receptor.

Furthermore, within the framework of dissemination of false information, the importance of disinformation is recognized when it is defined as: "Verifiably false or misleading

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ VAZQUEZ, M. "Las operaciones psicológicas y operaciones de información de campaña", page. 40, XXX Curso de EMACON, 1998, available in: <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/download/articulo/4643368.pdf&ved=2ahUKEWjgzYWh>

¹⁵ Ibid., page. 42,

information that is created, presented and disclosed for profit or to deliberately deceive the population, and that can cause public harm"¹⁶.

In view of its importance and impact, the disinformation strategy enabled in social media is delivered by taking advantage of the complexity of cyberspace, as well as the difficulty of perceiving between the virtual and the real. At the same time, it is important to highlight the difficult relations between the international and the national stakeholders. Therefore, the most prominent objectives of disinformation are to take advantage of ambiguity and / or a power vacuum to increase divisions in the social structure, modify opinions and preferences, and distort future expectations.

Therefore, through social media, an authentic "military operation" can be waged that, by utilizing disinformation, contributes to and facilitates the achievement of the objectives outlined in a campaign plan. In this way, the relevance of propaganda and disinformation will be analysed in depth as a case study, Libya.

These factors, along with the numerous actors (both endogenous and exogenous) involved, make Libya an ungovernable country, without a single central power and with an exacerbated social and political division, not only because of the internal issues of tribalism, but also due to the poor distribution of natural resources.

An overview of disinformation in Libya

From an intelligence perspective, it is important to question the reliability of information. However, after carrying out a collective process of coherent opinions on social media¹⁷, over a short period of time, the uncertainty about the future of Libya can be appreciated through the number of opinions that are distributed within the digital field.

It is convenient to mention that, within the current political, military and economic panorama of Libya, obtaining reliable information becomes a challenging task due to, among other reasons, the problem of containment. This highlights the difficulty of measuring and limiting the spread of false or erroneous news in social media due to the

¹⁶ La desinformación en línea. Com-2018-236-F1-es-main-part-1 Bruselas, 26.4.2018 com (2018) 236 final Comunicación de la Comisión al parlamento europeo.

¹⁷ Analysis carried out by the author, in which numerous opinions were extracted from social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Date of analysis April 25, 2019.

large number of operative actors and, as a result of the impossibility of quickly monitoring all the information disseminated.

Despite this, *Democracy Reporting International's monthly report for December 2018*¹⁸ claims that in Libya there is a significant amount of propaganda emitted by internal Libyan actors, for example, the militias. However, despite the scarcity of official accounts, they established that those that have a greater degree of influence are those belonging to political figures, government institutions, or influencers. Likewise, it is asserted that in many Libyan Facebook or Twitter accounts, there is a key narrative that modifies the Libyan public opinion, and this contributes to a manipulation of the narrative presented by the media.

In fact, the situation in Libya has a virtually unfathomable digital fingerprint. By using Google search as an extraction tool with the keywords "Libya + News" and "Libia+Noticias" (action that any individual wishing to obtain information about the situation in Libya would likely do), the accumulated fingerprint shows a result of 209 million indexed entries¹⁹.

In addition, if one uses the same method with social media (Facebook and Twitter), reliable information will at first be very limited. Nevertheless, by entering the previous search terms and adding preferred Boolean²⁰ operators (with terms that require a more tailored process of requesting information), the "information" obtained can be divided into six groups:

1. Exchange of opinions in the form of 'facts' that cannot be verified;
2. Aggregations about users' individual preferences;
3. Reflections where references to facts published in the press prevail (verified and not verified);

¹⁸ DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL. "Libya social media monitoring report", December/January 2019, available in: <https://www.democracy-reporting.org/libya-social-media-report/january/>

¹⁹ Analysis carried out by the author, where a search of the Google entries with the key words (Libya + News) and (Libia + noticias) is carried out in order to see the relevance of the topic. Date of analysis April 26, 2019.

²⁰ The 'Boolean operators' or also called search operators are logical links between the terms that explain the relationship between search concepts. The proper use of these operators allows better results in information retrieval.

Disinformation campaign between the actors

Between April the 3rd and 4th of this year, the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar, launched an armed offensive (Operation Liberation of Tripoli) in the capital against the forces of Tripolitania and the GNA from Cyrenaica²³. The main purpose was to take the capital in order to gain the necessary national and international legitimacy to be able to govern in Libya. Based on this political-military event, disinformation and propaganda about the tactical and operative activity of both sides spreads rapidly through social media, blogs and national and international press under what is called Information Warfare.

We can detect the spread of disinformation in certain Arabic blogs such as bald-news.com, arabyoum.com, sabq-sa, alsharqtimes.com, medanelakhbar.com and uk.arabicnews.com. They publish, in an automated fashion, articles mentioning Haftar – who has appeared in more than 15,000 occasions since the day of the offensive²⁴.

As a result, this inundation of information provided by the blogs reviewed, social media links in which Haftar is mentioned, and opinions and information (verified or not) from users may directly influence the beliefs of the population, and especially their perception of the offensive process.

One prime example is Libya Al-Ahrar TV's Facebook page, which with more than 246,000 interactions, is the most influential active 'user' on the network in Libya. The most predominant website is arabic.rt.com, with more than 263,000 interactions in Arabic²⁵. It

²³ DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL, "Situación en Libia 17.04.2019", *Gobierno de España, Gabinete de la presidencia del gobierno*, available in: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/situaci%C3%B3n-libia-17042019>

²⁴ SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, "Information warfare in Libya: the online advance of khalifa Haftar", *Centro studi internazionali y Culture digital media*, page 2, May 2019, available in: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Information%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzi-7hEjs8fJXNs0T4HDx22LXhMxQ6tZIoP3ezl28E17haIDjJHWQCc

²⁵ SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, "Information warfare in Libya: the online advance of khalifa Haftar", *Centro studi internazionali y Culture digital media*, page 13, May 2019, available in: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Information%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzi-7hEjs8fJXNs0T4HDx22LXhMxQ6tZIoP3ezl28E17haIDjJHWQCc

is important to note the role of external actors in both of these communication platforms; Libya Al-Ahrar belongs to Qatar, while RT-present belongs to Russia, which reaffirms the express interest of foreign states in Libya's conflict.

Consequently, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar, Egypt and the UAE produce at least three quarters of the detected content; and France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, together with other European countries, produce information about the Libyan crisis in their own respective languages²⁶. This demonstrates the interest that exogenous actors (principally Arab countries, Western countries and Russia) in spreading news and commentary concerning Libya, with the global audience as a target for disinformation. In fact, the following table shows how mentions of Haftar²⁷ are distributed across certain languages.

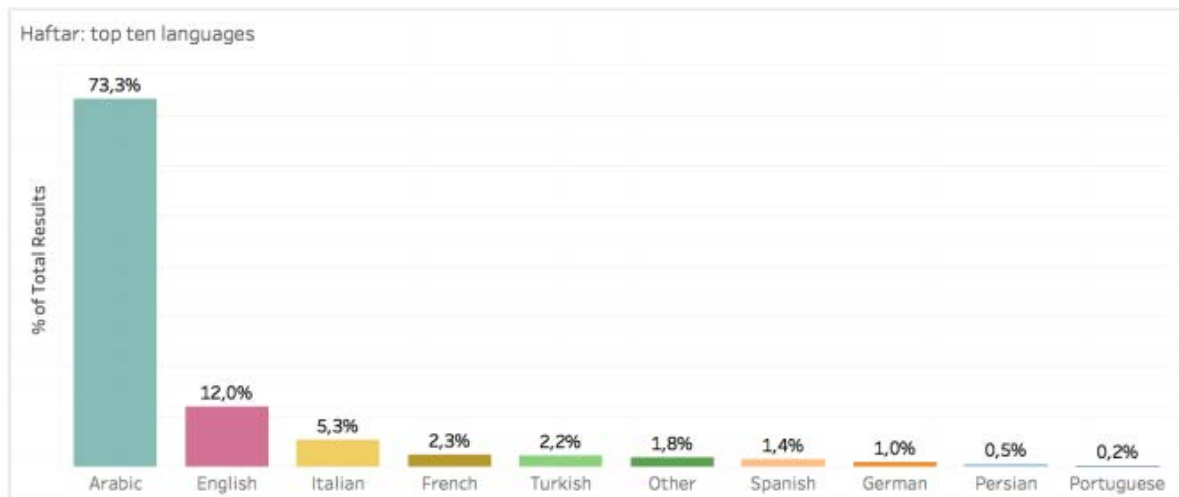


Figure 1: Haftar top ten languages

²⁶ SOCIAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, "Information warfare in Libya: the online advance of khalifa Haftar", *Centro studi internazionali y Culture digital media*, page 2, May 2019, available in: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Information%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzi-7hEjs8fJXNs0T4HDx22LXhMxQ6tZIoP3ezl28E17haIDjJHWQCc

²⁷ (Ibid, página 8).

Likewise, this Tweet shared by Mary Fitzgerald (@MaryFitzger) notes how the information promulgated by the different countries responds directly to her interests in Libya rather than to inform her objectively about the current situation.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Twitter with date April 30, 2019. Source. Twitter.

Indeed, many researchers, such as Wolfram Lacher²⁸, have demonstrated the existence of small automated accounts in social media. These 'bots' attempt to exert pro-Haftar tendency and influence. Oddly enough, these users frequently have their locations listed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE²⁹. The picture below addresses such activity:

²⁸ German researcher specializing in the Middle East and North Africa at the German Institute for Foreign Affairs and Security. For more information: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/scientist-detail/wolfram-lacher/>

²⁹ GATNASH, A. & DAHAN, N. "In Libya, traditional and social media are used to fuel war", *Arab Tyrant Manual*, 12 April 2019, available in : <https://arabtyrantmanual.com/articles/in-libya-traditional-and-social-media-are-used-to-fuel-war/>



Figure 3. Screenshot of Twitter with date April 6th, 2019. Source. Twitter.

Furthermore, some Libyan TV channels such as Libya Al-Hadath (officially pro-Gadafist) disseminate propaganda about Haftar, for example through songs – where his figure and offensive are glorified³⁰. As shown by the following images taken from Twitter, user @SameralAtrush uploads a recording from TV Libya Al-Hadath, in which a singer appears, glorifying Haftar.

³⁰ GATNASH, A. & DAHAN, N. "In Libya, traditional and social media are used to fuel war", *Arab Tyrant Manual*, 12 April 2019, available in: <https://arabtyrantmanual.com/articles/in-libya-traditional-and-social-media-are-used-to-fuel-war/>



Figure 4. Screenshot of Twitter with date April 7th, 2019. Source. Twitter.

This use of the TV, radio or social networks directly influences the population by promoting activism in the cause. By firmly positioning on one side of the conflict, forms of media further exacerbate social fragmentation in Libya. However, there is particular zeal in denying both Libyan and international society access to the reliable information needed to make decisions that are not misdirected by external influences and interests.

On top of that, other elements of disinformation already explained under the earlier heading: 'Disinformation and propaganda' must be highlighted. These are the following:

Firstly, it indicates the 'ability' of users to specify numerical data that cannot be contrasted with other sources of information, either in terms of number of deaths / injuries or of cities invaded / liberated. The image below is a clear reflection of the state of disinformation perpetrated by both sides regarding the control of cities and towns across the country. In this case, it is claimed that different sides have controlled the city of Yarmouk six times in the same day.

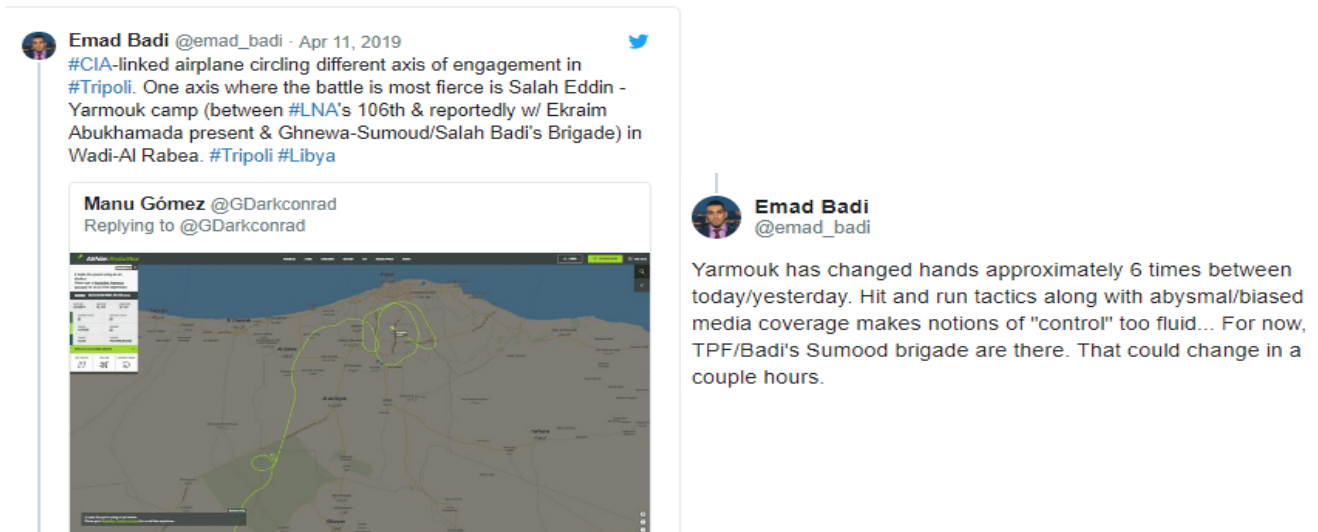


Figure 5. Screenshot of Twitter with date April 11, 2019. Source. Twitter.

Secondly, the example below shows inconsistent or manifestly false information. *The Libya Times* account (@thelibyatimes)³¹ states that Western governments claim that the leader of ISIS was hidden in Libya, linking the tweet to a blog that masquerades as an official newspaper. However, the original information was get from a British newspaper³² that lacked credibility, and made no reference to the whereabouts of Al-Baghdadi.



Figure 6. Screenshot of Twitter with date May 12, 2019. Source. Twitter.

³¹ To visualize the blog: <http://www.libyatimes.net/news/173-abubakr-al-baghdadi-is-hiding-in-libya-says-british-military>).

³² Available in: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1121577/isis-news-syria-iraq-mi5-andrew-parker>

In the same way, alongside this manifestly false information, there are tweets from official accounts that directly express their support for one side of the conflict. Moreover, these accounts deploy disinformation techniques framed in the context of rivalry and competition, through which they may cast blame upon others in order to influence opinions, question the past actions of opposing actors in the conflict, and fill the power vacuum.



Figure 7. Screenshot of Twitter with date April 6th, 2019. Source. Twitter.

In the example above, we see Russia's effort to blame the current situation in Libya on NATO's 2011 intervention. It is questionable whether such accusations reflect a genuine stance on the issue or are instead posturing efforts intended to undermine NATO and diminish Western influence in the country, while simultaneously improving Russia's international image.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the various actors in Libya employ these propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Both endogenous and exogenous actors willingly employ tools of information warfare to achieve their respective objectives in the conflict, and further their wider geopolitical interests.

Conclusion

The political, military and social division prevalent in Libya since 2014 is an ideal environment for a war of information fought through propaganda, false news, and disinformation, especially through the media of social networks, blogs and newspapers.

Likewise, the multitude of national and international actors operating in this area, their complexity, and the volatile interests of each party, show the inherent biases of the actors in the conflict, which are reflected in disinformation campaigns. In fact, due to the techniques that are applied by actors, it is often difficult to determine the reality of positions in the Libyan crisis and where true allegiances lie.

For this reason, we must consider the dual objectives of such campaigns; they are both intended to misinform the domestic audience in Libya, but also to influence foreign analysts and media to involuntarily contribute to the spread of disinformation. As such, to maintain a clear vision of events in Libya is an arduous task, this creates great difficulty in formulating a realistic approach to the conflict that can contribute to its resolution.

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