

Libya: conflict and (narratives of) violent extremism undermine the COVID-19 response –

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Libya was one of the last countries in the world to detect cases of COVID-19. In mid-May, the number of confirmed cases were 65 with 3 deaths, although actual figures may be much higher due to the limited testing and detection capacities of the health system, weakened by years of conflict.

The pandemic coincides with the battle for the conquest of Tripoli launched by Khalifa Haftar and the eastern-based Libyan-Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) entering its second year. The rhetoric of violent extremism provides the legitimization narratives that underpin the battle on both fronts, with LAAF accusing the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the forces defending Tripoli of acquaintances with terrorists and extremists, and the GNA accusing Khalifa Haftar of being a rogue war criminal. Both coalitions harbour radical Islamists fighters among their ranks.

The UN, the US and the EU have repeatedly called the Libyan parties to sustain a humanitarian ceasefire and spare the country more suffering in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the formal agreement by Libyan actors has not resulted in actual discontinuation of armed clashes.

The first measures adopted by the GNA to counter the spread of coronavirus suggest a troubling entanglement of health and security governance, leading observers to speak of a “weaponization” of the pandemic for narrow political interests. Such measures include the imposition of a curfew to avoid possible unrests, whose implementation will provide hybrid armed actors with additional clout; the closure of land borders, with an inevitable rise of the black market; and the release of prisoners from Libya’s overcrowded detention facilities, which has favoured several alleged members of radical and terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Less controversial measures have been adopted in the subsequent weeks, but they are unlikely to be enough to tackle structural limits of Libya’s health sector. Libya’s response to the coronavirus pandemic has been significantly weakened by the deliberate targeting of health facilities, pursued in particular by Haftar’s LAAF as a strategy of war. There are also shortages in basic goods, including pharmaceuticals. Finally, the provision of health services struggles with the consequences of the oil blockade enforced by Haftar’s forces since January, resulting in billions of losses for the state budget.

The pandemic is having a significant impact on migratory flows across Libya. Irregular migration into Europe increased in early 2020, most likely as a result of instability within Libya. Malta and Italy have seized the opportunity to close their ports. Those who are intercepted and returned to Libya face critical conditions in detention centres, where overcrowding and poor hygiene have the potential to fuel the spread of the pandemic. This entails a major risk of strengthening the stigma and isolation of migrants in Libya.