



DRAWING AND REDRAWING THE OUTLINES OF LIBYA'S FUTURE

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As the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of the anti-Gaddafi revolution approaches, Libya finds itself in the middle of a fragile resumption of the peace process.

Recent major developments in the political, military and economic landscape have sparked a wave of mild optimism around the possibility to put an end to the protracted crisis that, since 2011, has been continually reproducing itself through different cycles of civil strife.

The latest of those developments occurred after a sixteen-month confrontation along Tripoli's southern outskirts between forces aligned with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in the capital and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and loyal to the House of Representatives (HoR) located in the eastern



city of Tobruk. As we will further analyze, this phase was especially characterized by soaring levels of regionalization and internationalization, as Turkey's intervention on the GNA's side was decisive in shifting the balance on the battlefield and causing the withdrawal of Haftar's forces - backed by Russia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt - from Western Libya. The subsequent stalemate along Sirte's red line prompted the rival camps to announce a ceasefire in August 2020,¹ which later found an official translation in the ceasefire agreement signed in Geneva on October 23rd by military representatives of the opposite sides.²

Multiple peace tracks

When signed at the end of October, the permanent ceasefire deal was greeted with a wave of hope that it might serve as a valuable tool through which the "no military solution to Libya" may become something more concrete than a mere mantra advocated by international mediators, to which foreign powers mostly pay lip service. Indeed, this recent ceasefire is the greatest achievement of a broader security track which has, until now, mainly consisted in talks and negotiations among military officers of the rival camps forming the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC).

Within the institutional framework of the United Nations office in Geneva, the parties formally agreed on the mutual withdrawal of forces deployed on the front lines, the departure of all foreign fighters, the freezing of all training agreements with foreign powers until a new national unity government is in power, as well as the demobilization of armed groups.³ More recently, members of the JMC, now symbolically united in the Group of 10, met in

¹ "Libya Crisis: Rival Authorities Announce Ceasefire", *BBC*, August 21, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53863627>

² N. Cumming-Bruce and D. Walsh, "Libya Cease-Fire Raises Hopes for Full Peace Deal", *New York Times*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/23/world/middleeast/libya-ceasefire.html>

³ "Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement", *Crisis Group*, Briefing n.80, November 4, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/b80-fleshing-out-libya-ceasefire-agreement>



Ghadames and Sirte to take further steps towards the implementation of the ceasefire deal, which will be administered through several sub-committees.⁴ However, the achievement of the ambitious goals set in Geneva will largely depend on some crucial factors strongly embedded in the Libyan crisis.

Military support and direct involvement of regional and international powers have grown enormously in the last phase of the conflict, whose dynamics have been highly shaped by Turkey's intervention in support of the GNA's coalition on one side and by the assistance provided by Russia, UAE and Egypt to Haftar's war effort on the other. Therefore, the implementation of the provisions dealing with the presence of foreign fighters is inextricably linked to the different agendas of the States that have intervened in Libya and that continue to sustain the military capacity of each competing side. In addition to this, dismantling armed groups involves the implementation of transformative processes which would deeply affect the real nature of the competing factions, highly involved in schemes of patronage and co-optation of non-state armed actors - many of them already integrated in the state security apparatus.

Relevant developments have also concerned the economic sphere. Over the months of September and October, financial consultations and discussions on a possible unitary budget summoned representatives of the GNA and the rival eastern Interim Government.⁵ Dialogues centered on the formation of the Unified Financial Committee (UFC) were held in the coastal city of Brega among board members of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), officials of the western and eastern Financial Ministries and

⁴ S. Zaptia, "5+5 Joint Military Commission Agrees Permanent Ceasefire Steps at Ghadames Meeting", *Libya Herald*, November 4, 2020.

<https://www.libyaherald.com/2020/11/04/55-joint-military-commission-agrees-permanent-ceasefire-steps-at-ghadames-meeting/>

⁵ M. Dorda, O. Crowley and D. Moshashai, "Inside Libya", *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, November 2020, n.3. <https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/inside-libya-5>



delegations from western and eastern Libya.⁶ Furthermore, the lifting of the oil blockade, previously imposed by Haftar's forces in January 2020, fostered the resumption of the oil production which, in the midst of November, reached the level of 1.2 million barrels per day.⁷ Yet, it is important to take into consideration that Libyan oil output is currently flowing to global oil markets that are facing the negative pressure and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As envisaged in the conclusions of the Berlin Conference held in January 2020, the security and economic peace tracks proceed alongside a political one.

Under the auspices of the United Nations, the first round of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) was officially launched in Tunis on November 9th 2020, gathering 75 participants in representation of what was defined as a "full social and political spectrum of Libyan society."⁸ In its first stage, the initiative resulted in the scheduling of presidential and parliamentary elections on December 24th 2021, a symbolic date as it marks the 70th anniversary of Libya's national independence. It also produced a general understanding on the need to create a new Presidential Council (PC) composed of three members, each representing one of the three Libyan historical regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan), with a leadership meant to be separated from the one heading the government. Weeks after its onset, the UN-led Forum reconvened in Geneva and voted to appoint the new interim national leadership on February 5th. The outcome of the selection

⁶ M. Dorda, O. Crowley and D. Moshashai, "Inside Libya", *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, February 2021, n. 7, https://www.kas.de/documents/282499/282548/INSIDE+LIBYA+January+Editi.pdf/8c9cab27-2628-2fb6-5703-647d5a5c66df?version=1.0&t=1612256132148&fbclid=IwAR0LSD4Bn_KeU9nNPzHqFFlVpQvGCGBOIB2jk1uyu1SPrZcuzvnmih5e0o

⁷ A. Ghaddar, "Libyan Oil Production Tops 1.2 million bpd", *Reuters*, November 13, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-oil-idUSL1N2HZ0SF>

⁸ UNSMIL, "Libyan Political Dialogue Forum kicks off in the Tunisian Capital and Discusses a Draft Political Roadmap", November 10, 2020. <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-political-dialogue-forum-kicks-tunisian-capital-and-discusses-draft-political-roadmap>



process sanctioned the victory of the list composed by the businessman Abdulhamid Dbaiba, chosen to serve as Prime Minister designate, Mohamed Younes al-Menfi, hailing from the eastern city of Tobruk and elected as Head of the PC, Abdullah Hussein al-Lafi and Musa al-Koni, deputy heads of the PC for western and southern Libya respectively.⁹ It thus sanctioned the exclusion from top executive positions of current prominent politicians Agila Saleh, head of the HoR, and Fathi Bashagha, GNA's interior minister.

As a process *in fieri*, this track proceeds between enthusiasm and fear. The resumption of a negotiated path to draw the outlines of Libya's political future comes as a breath amid last months' suffocating chaos. Yet, previous attempts to boost a resolution of the prolonged crisis and provide the country with a national unity government teach us how attempted peace and governance arrangements may actually end up further exacerbating divisions and becoming new sources of polarization.

The new interim government, tasked to lead the country towards national elections, will be walking on thin ice. The winning list appears to be mostly representative of Misratan factions and Islamist forces, as the incoming Prime Minister Dbaiba hails from a wealthy family of Misrata and the new head of the PC al-Menfi is considered to be very close to the latter. Dbaiba is also assumed to have strong ties with Turkish government.¹⁰ The major challenge of the recently appointed leadership will be the formation of a government that is able to present itself as a credible, legitimate and representative authority and to cope with multiple competing domestic and foreign interests and visions. In this regard, obtaining the vote of confidence from the Tobruk-based parliament within the time frame set in the LPDF's political roadmap represents a first essential test.

⁹ UN News, "Libya: 'Historic Moment' as UN-led Forum Selects New Interim Leadership", February 5, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084022>

¹⁰ M. Eljarh, "Analysis: Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Appoints New Government for Libya", *Libya Desk*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.libyadesk.com/articles/libya-new-government-analysis>



The uneasy Libyan peace process is developing along multiple parallel tracks, each showing its own risks and challenges and requiring integration with the others in order to be effective. Multiplicity also defines the external actors differently involved in mediation efforts until now. Besides the UN, Morocco and Egypt have recently sponsored parallel initiatives, by hosting high-level talks on political and security issues among representatives of the competing blocks. An Egyptian delegation also visited Tripoli for a meeting with GNA's officials in late December.¹¹ Significantly, the search for a political solution to the Libyan predicament intertwines with the "active neutrality" strategy pursued by Rabat – seeking to establish itself as a key mediator while advocating non-interference and respect for Libya's sovereignty¹² – and with Cairo's aspirations to play a decisive role in shaping the Libyan transition,¹³ against the backdrop of a deeply tangled maze composed of the interests of several regional and international powers. As with the whole conflict, peace efforts are bound to be a patchwork of multiple agencies and structures rather than parts of a unified and smooth process.

A path already taken?

The opening of a new phase of talks and negotiations comes with the imperatives of preventing a new resort to violence and planting the seeds of a durable and sustainable peace in war-torn Libya. Not an easy task in a highly fragmented context where the main rival blocks, far from being homogeneous, are actually fluid in their

¹¹ "Egyptian Delegation Visits Libyan Capital for Talks with GNA", *Al Jazeera*, December 27, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/27/egyptian-delegation-visits-libyan-capital-for-talks-with-gna>

¹² Y. Abouzzohour, "Libya's Tangier Talks: Why is Morocco Getting Involved?", *Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis*, December 3, 2020. <https://mipa.institute/8290>

T. Hamamdjian, "Crise en Libye: pourquoi le Maroc joue les facilitateurs", *Jeune Afrique*, September 7, 2020. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1041087/politique/crise-en-libye-pourquoi-le-maroc-joue-les-faciliteurs/>

¹³ "Amid 'Devolution' in Libyan Peace Process, Egypt Looks to Leave Mark on Political-Military Landscape", *Mada Masr*, October 12, 2020. <https://madasr.com/en/2020/10/12/feature/politics/amid-devolution-in-libyan-peace-process-egypt-looks-to-leave-mark-on-political-military-landscape/>



composition and subject to shifting alliances. Furthermore, the persisting emphasis on a Libyan ownership of the peace process is accompanied by a still weak and insufficient approach aimed at addressing – and finally overcoming – the deep foreign meddling that strongly shapes local conflict dynamics.¹⁴

Although the current peace process is taking place in a different setting than the one in which the 2015 Skhirat agreement was negotiated and partially implemented, the future of Libya's political transition is still dependent on the use and fulfillment of common tools and tenets of mediation efforts led by the international community, namely power-sharing arrangements, the creation of a government of national unity and the holding of elections. Yet, the Libyan crisis has so far witnessed how the aforementioned means, in spite of being designed to foster war termination and political compromise, may induce distorting effects when shifting from an ideal and theoretical dimension to the interaction with the reality on the ground. Indeed, while carrying with themselves the potential to deliver short-term stability and, in the specific case of elections, democratic legitimacy, such instruments also come with the risk of fostering political opportunism over a genuine will to engage in a cooperative peace path.¹⁵ Moreover, they may result in the freezing of existing power relations and the reification of social and political cleavages, at the expense of a transition towards a more inclusive State.

A widespread social protest

In the meshes of the precarious peace process, there lies, suspended, the future of the Libyan people. Indeed, last summer was not only marked by an informal ceasefire among rival camps paving the way to the Geneva agreement: a widespread social protest broke out between August and September, as hundreds of

¹⁴ K. Mezran and E. Badi, "Libyan Ceasefire Agreement Faces Hurdles due to Foreign Intervention", *Atlantic Council*, November 5, 2020.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/libyan-ceasefire-agreement-faces-hurdles-due-to-foreign-intervention/>

¹⁵ M. Dorda, O. Crowley and D. Moshashai, "Inside Libya".



people took to the streets of several cities, such as Tripoli and Misrata in the west, Sebha in the south and Benghazi in the east,¹⁶ hence transcending the divisions and cleavages of the conflict. While the immediate cause of the protests was linked to electricity outages and poor supply, the demonstrations soon became a platform for the expression of a broader and deeper discontent originated from the deteriorating economic conditions and the dysfunctionality or total collapse of public services. The latter are nothing but the products of a crisis that has been increasingly destabilizing the country for almost a decade. In addition to that, the last military confrontation, fueled by each side's international sponsors, continued at a time when the country was facing the spread of Covid-19 infections,¹⁷ which have reached 124 026 units and caused 1953 deaths.¹⁸

Far from being an isolated event, the protests came as a cry against the factional political élites of both rival camps and a call to draw the outlines of Libya's future not just through power-sharing and elections but, above all, by putting at the center of the stage Libyan people's needs, grievances and aspirations.

¹⁶ A. Bajec, "Libyan Protests in Tripoli and Beyond Signal People's Discontent at Political Elite", *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, September 28, 2020.

<https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/libyan-protests-in-tripoli-and-beyond-signal-peoples-discontent-at-political-elite/>

"Anger in Libya's Benghazi Over Power Cuts, Living Conditions", *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/11/anger-in-libyas-benghazi-over-power-cuts-living-conditions>

¹⁷ E. Badi, "Covid-19 and Libya's Tragedy of the Commons", in *The Politics of Pandemics: Evolving Regime-Opposition Dynamics in the MENA Region*, eds. Karim Mezran and Annalisa Perteghella, ISPI - Atlantic Council (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2020), pp. 13-25. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/politics-pandemics-evolving-regime-opposition-dynamics-mena-region-28410>

¹⁸ World Health Organization, Libya Country Profile, <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/ly>. Last access: February 9th 2021.