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Biden's Challenges in Stabilizing Libya

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Upon assuming power, President Joe Biden and his administration will face a still-chaotic Libya despite the many political maneuverings afoot among Libyans and their respective outside backers. One promising intra-Libyan process is the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), sponsored by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and held in the Tunisian capital Tunis. On November 14, 2020, the UNSMIL hailed a “breakthrough” in the North African country’s fledgling peace process and announced that the 75 Libyan participants who gathered in Tunis for the LPDF had preliminarily agreed on a roadmap toward elections by December 24, 2021, Libya’s Independence Day.

The ceremonial description, however, obfuscated the politicking that permeated the Libyan parties’ deliberations, the actual precariousness of the foundations of the talks, and more importantly, the far-reaching impact their collapse would have. In a revelatory comment post-dialogue, a frustrated Stephanie Williams—the special representative to the secretary-general of the United Nations—likened some of the self-serving factions of Libya’s political elite to “political dinosaurs” who risk becoming extinct if they do not make themselves relevant to ongoing negotiations. While many share the sentiment that Libya’s elite has indeed become the equivalent of political relics, several precedents suggest that relying on them to bring about their own extinction is a self-defeating strategy.

Nevertheless, the logic behind hosting talks and planning elections is explicit. The civil war that erupted in 2014 has spawned parallel political and economic institutions, polarized the country’s social spheres, and de-facto fractured the very notion of legitimacy in Libya. The vacuum that ensued, protracted by the continuous interventionism of regional players, was profitable to a narrow clique of Libyan elites who grew increasingly self-serving in their pursuit of personal interests. What was already an unsustainable reality became a lucrative status quo that this elite informally agreed to maintain, even at the cost of rising instability, criminality, violence, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, a pestilence overwhelming the North African country. Until April 4, 2019, this elite had primarily focused, at best, on spoiling and stalling mediation attempts or weaponizing efforts at political reunification to advance their own agendas.

The Tripoli Offensive Saga

General Khalifa Haftar’s launch of a surprise offensive on April 4, 2019 to capture the Libyan capital of Tripoli was perhaps the ultimate act of egomania—the epitome of how morally bankrupt the elite had become. In doing so, the general not only unrepentantly obliterated years of diplomacy; he also spoiled a UN national conference planned days after his attack and willfully put in harm’s way nearly half of Libya’s population, which resides in the capital. His bidding was given the green light by John Bolton, former US national security advisor in the Trump Administration. Militarily, Haftar was supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with heavy weapons, fixed-wing aircraft, and Chinese-made drones. Saudi Arabia provided the funds necessary to co-opt the forces that Haftar deployed toward Tripoli under the banner of his Libyan National Army (LNA), while France shielded him from any political repercussions for his attempt at a power grab.



The aura of inevitability on which Haftar had ridden to Tripoli's doorstep had diplomats fooled. Many made overtures to him pre-April 2019, marketing him as the panacea he never was or trying to incorporate him into a power-sharing arrangement he never wanted. The complicity of the international community in allowing Haftar to attack Tripoli, however, was commensurate with the Libyan people's refusal to relapse into authoritarianism: civilians in western Libya mobilized, converting themselves into support forces, and joined armed groups to swiftly counter the septuagenarian's offensive in its tracks, effectively averting what would otherwise have been a massive humanitarian crisis.

Months later, the fighting had evolved from a proxy war fought by Libyans with international support into one where foreign countries were now calling the shots. After Russian mercenaries affiliated with the paramilitary organization, the Wagner Group, deployed to Tripoli's outskirts to spearhead Haftar's offensive in September 2019, Turkey gradually scaled up its own decisive intervention. Ankara negotiated the Wagner mercenaries' withdrawal from Tripoli directly with Putin, a development that enabled anti-Haftar forces from expelling remnants of the LNA from western Libya altogether.

The successful counteroffensive precipitated the end of the war over Tripoli but ushered in a more precarious political and military situation in Libya. The LNA-aligned units retreated toward the coastal city of Sirte and the military airbase of al-Jufra in central Libya. In both locales, Russian mercenaries took advantage of Haftar's weakened posture and his dependence on foreign support to significantly expand their footprint. The Wagner Group, along with Syrian mercenaries transferred from areas in Syria held by Bashar al-Assad's regime, have entrenched themselves by building and fortifying defensive structures in Sirte and al-Jufra. Haftar's traditional backers, the UAE and Egypt, have also doubled down on support for his LNA. Cairo has worked with Moscow in training and reorganizing the LNA's core units. Conversely, Turkey has also doubled down on its entrenchment in western Libya, where its Syrian mercenaries retain a presence in al-Watiya and Misrata and in military bases in Tripoli's suburbs. Ankara is expanding the scope of its military cooperation with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA)-aligned interior and defense ministries by training Libyan forces—an endeavor complemented by diplomatic efforts to broker deals that would see Turkish companies expand their operations in Libya.

It is against this backdrop, which can only be qualified as a simmering conflict, that the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum hosted its first session. Western powers—chief among them the United States—had indolently spectated for over 16 months as regional powers wreaked havoc at Europe's doorstep as a result of a short-sighted desire to accommodate an aspiring dictator and the cabal of authoritarians supporting him. The shortcomings of this collective bystander apathy speak for themselves: Libyans reel from the effects of a war they never wanted while regional powers, which should never have been involved, prolong their misery.



Salvaging Libya's Political Talks and Its Future

Cynically and pragmatically, the path for Libya's contemporary talks to succeed—and for further instability to be averted—does not solely pass through the Libyan cities of Tripoli, Benghazi, Sabha, Ghadames, or Sirte. It encompasses Abu Dhabi, Ankara, Cairo, Moscow, Brussels, and Washington. Deflecting from this reality by emphasizing the importance of a Libyan-led solution while ignoring continuing serial violations of the arms embargo by regional and global powers is short-sighted. It is a policy that sets up a Libyan solution for failure while emboldening international spoilers to divide and conquer Libya while driving it to ruin.

The sole international actor whose political capital could meaningfully and decisively exert diplomatic pressure on both domestic and regional players is the United States. In that sense, the incoming Biden Administration has an opportunity to right its antecedent's wrongs, if only by adopting a more pragmatic approach to its policy toward Libya. While there is little to no chance that Libya will become a foreign policy priority for the new administration, simply factoring in that an inclusive Libyan political agreement is contingent on foreign countries meeting their pre-agreed commitments would already be a breakthrough in how US policy is formulated.

Contemporarily, domestic parties and international meddlers are essentially deadlocked in a stalemate, one that the UNSMIL is seeking to exploit and convert into a political solution brokered between Libyan parties—willfully obfuscating the fact that foreigners are simultaneously politically and militarily equipping Libyan parties with the tools to jettison or contest any agreement. This cycle of complicity will also need to be broken by a more proactive Washington if it is to protect the LPDF from spoilers. Mitigating these risks would require an increased level of coordination between Washington and Brussels, which a Biden Administration is well-positioned to do. Indeed, the incoming US administration will have an interest in unifying the European bloc's foreign policy outlooks and reining in diverging ideas. The presence of several francophone speakers within Biden's announced cabinet—most notably incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken—could also be instrumentalized as part of an effort to rectify the course of France's unsettling foreign policy toward Libya. Indeed, not only did Paris inexplicably leave high-end US-made anti-tank missiles in one of Haftar's main forward bases in July 2019, but the Elysée Palace has also unilaterally and consistently undermined Europe's fledgling attempts to develop a collective policy toward Libya. Washington would do well to limit Paris's unilateralist impulses; such a diplomatic effort would allow a more rational European policy to crystallize toward both Libya and other geopolitical theaters, such as the eastern Mediterranean.

Given the volatile situation in Libya, coupled with the increasing risk of renewed armed confrontation between Haftar and the GNA, the two main protagonists, the incoming American administration will effectively have to land running. Biden must increase the level of involvement in support of the UN-led mediation. This could be better achieved with the appointment of a high-level envoy to help create a new process that addresses the real power of holders and spoilers in order to create a



constructive climate that would support holding national elections. Revealingly, despite still offering some of the most prominent spoilers the opportunity to be part of the new executive authorities that the LPDF would spawn, the first round of the dialogue forum's talks in Tunis ended without reaching the much-sought comprehensive agreement and reshuffle in executive authorities that the UNSMIL was hoping it could broker.

This speaks not only to the extent to which Libya's elite is disconnected from Libyan constituencies longing for change, but also to the fact that the disunity and dishonesty at the international level is trickling down and being mirrored at the level of the political talks. The presence of a US envoy would help considerably in adding credibility to the process among Libyan citizens, many of whom have lost faith in the international community and the prospect of democracy. With minimal effort, the United States would effectively be subjecting Libya's political elite to strong public pressure by diplomatically coercing them and their foreign enablers, in turn creating an avenue for much-needed change.

More broadly, in the short term, both Russia and Turkey remain enemies of any negotiated outcome that would see other international actors gain influence and possibly play a role that would inevitably reduce the decisive clout they enjoy today. This is primarily why both Ankara and Moscow have invested in entrenching their influence in the security sector by training and equipping Libyan forces. To counterbalance Libyan actors' dependence on these weaponized and flawed "security sector reform" blueprints designed to protract the conflict, the Biden Administration should redouble efforts to promote a technical blueprint to unify Libya's military within the framework of preparing for elections—essentially spearheading a program for overhauling security sector governance. This effort could be complemented by an exercise of diplomatic coercion against Turkey and the UAE, which Washington should pressure to, respectively, repatriate Syrian mercenaries and halt transferring funds to bankroll Russia's intervention in Libya. Another avenue to put pressure on Moscow is for Biden's administration to leverage the US House of Representatives-endorsed "Libya Stabilization Act" to impose US Treasury sanctions on Libyan and regional actors proven to be involved in enabling Wagner's entrenchment in eastern and central Libya. This would go a long way toward averting the collapse of the LPDF—or the security dialogue on which the very premise of the political talks is based.

The LPDF Is the Way Forward

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum represents an exceedingly rare opportunity to devise a genuine dispute resolution framework and negotiating table for the contours of an intra-Libyan process that brings about political reform and institutional reunification. As these political, economic, and social rifts are gradually mended, the process would culminate with elections that would restore legitimacy. Nevertheless, international actors—particularly the United States—should not expect that the reshuffling of executive authorities will be a sufficient placation tactic that will bring this plan to fruition. Learning from past mistakes while adapting to the contemporary sociopolitical and



military situation is key if the process is to be moved forward. Overall, in addition to the countless domestic problems the Biden Administration will inherit and which it will have to manage creatively, the diplomatic context surrounding Libya in January 2021 is one that the White House will clearly have to adjust to as well.