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Libya's Political Deadlock: Why Multiple Initiatives Keep Stalling

Unit for Political Studies

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Libya is seeing a flurry of political and diplomatic activity across several fronts. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has launched a new initiative dubbed the “Structured Dialogue,” while Massad Boulos – an envoy for US President Donald Trump – has intensified his outreach and meetings with Libyan actors and regional stakeholders to formulate an American initiative for resolving the country’s long–running crisis. Simultaneously, the heads of the Presidential Council, the House of Representatives, and the High Council of State have hurriedly proposed a roadmap for holding general elections. Although these three initiatives coincide in time, they differ in their underlying motives, frames of reference, and priorities, as well as in the capacity of their respective backers to transform them into a viable roadmap, against the backdrop of a crisis–ridden Libyan landscape and a turbulent regional and international environment.

From Skhirat to Geneva

In 2015, in the wake of the political and institutional schism that gripped Libya the previous year due to a controversy over House of Representatives elections and General Khalifa Haftar’s “Operation Dignity,” UNSMIL launched the “Libyan Political Dialogue.” This process involved members of the House of Representatives and the General National Congress (GNC), alongside political, social, and academic figures, as well as representatives from municipal councils, political parties, civil society organizations, and women’s groups. The initiative aimed to unify Libya’s executive institutions and address its security challenges, as well as economic issues and living standards.¹ This effort culminated in the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement, better known as the Skhirat Agreement, after the Moroccan city where it was signed on 17 December 2015. The Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord (GNA) effectively began its work when its head, Fayez Al–Sarraj, entered Tripoli on March 30, 2016.

The Skhirat Agreement stipulated that the GNA’s mandate would last for one year, renewable for a second, after which it would hand over its duties to a new government formed under a constitution that was meant to be drafted in full before the GNA’s term expired.

The GNA was unable to meet the deadlines set out in the Skhirat Agreement, due to persistent institutional division and the fact that the House of Representative withdrew its support for the agreement. The political process collapsed entirely on 4 April 2019, when Haftar’s forces launched a failed offensive against the western region and the capital, Tripoli – the seat of the GNA.

After the failure of Haftar’s offensive, UNSMIL launched a new political dialogue. Starting in Tunisia, this culminated in the signing of a new political agreement in Geneva in early 2021, resulting in the formation of a Government of National Unity led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. The agreement mandated the unification of the executive – which had been divided since 2014 – and the implementation of a series of security, military, economic, and political measures, ultimately leading to parliamentary

¹ United Nations, United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), “Libyan Political Agreement,” accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGS6>.

and presidential elections and the establishment of permanent governing institutions by the end of 2021.² However, the prospects of the second political agreement differed little from those of the first; Libyan factions failed to organize elections to steer the country out of yet another transitional phase, and division resurfaced with the emergence of a parallel government and institutions in the eastern region, under Haftar's control.

The United Nations Initiative

Despite the failure of the Skhirat and Geneva agreements, UNSMIL then launched a new initiative for a resolution. This brought together 120 figures representing municipalities, political parties, universities, and various segments of society for what it dubbed a "Structured Dialogue." The aim was to address fundamental issues regarding governance, the economy, security, national reconciliation, and human rights, while creating the conditions for credible legislative and presidential elections, and supporting efforts to unify state institutions.³

The dialogue officially commenced on 14 December 2025. From then until June 2026, the dialogue teams held multiple rounds of meetings focusing on several key areas – most notably, ending Libya's political division and unifying its government and executive institutions, including financial and oversight bodies, security and military establishments, and the judiciary. The process emphasised the need for a specific timeframe for the transition period, bound by strict schedules to guide the country toward elections and the realization of the national reconciliation project.⁴

The final report of the Structured Dialogue, facilitated by the UN mission, emphasised "the urgent for a sole and effective executive authority, whose primary mandate is to manage the transitional phase and prepare the political, security, and institutional environment necessary for holding inclusive national elections as soon as possible." It further recommended "limiting the government's mandate to a preparatory phase not exceeding 18–24 months, based on a strict timeline that cannot be extended under any pretext," and called for "guarantees of the independence, impartiality, and capacity of the High National Elections Commission to operate freely and autonomously," urging a review of the Commission's make-up.⁵

In an effort to avoid the kind of disputes that could derail the broader dialogue, a smaller dialogue mechanism known as the "4 + 4 Committee" was established to address the political and legal obstacles hindering the organization of elections and to pave the way for holding both legislative and presidential polls.

² "A New Interim Government Elected in Libya: Background and Prospects," Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 8/2/2021, accessed 11/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D2E>.

³ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Structured Dialogue," accessed 11/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHiP>.

⁴ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Final Report on the Structured Dialogue," 3/6/2026, accessed 11/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH6d>.

⁵ Ibid.

The 4+4 committee started its work with a series of meetings in Tunisia. The UN mission later reported that it had made progress in preparing for the elections. In its latest update on the committee's activities, the mission said that during a meeting on 6 August, chaired by the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative Hanna Tetteh, the participants had agreed on a mechanism for appointing the head of HNEC and were continuing with consultations regarding the remaining provisions of the draft final agreement. In April 2026, the mission had also announced that the Committee had agreed on the members of the new board of the elections commission.

The Trump Administration Steps In

On 1 December 2024, 50 days before the start of his second term, US president-elect Donald Trump appointed his co-father-in-law, Massad Boulos, as an advisor on Middle East and African affairs. Upon his appointment, and for clear commercial reasons, Boulos showed particular interest in the Libyan file. He held meetings with regional stakeholders involved in the issue, as well as visiting the country and meeting key political and military factions from both east and west – actors he subsequently convened in Paris in early 2026. The Paris meeting is seen as the starting point for what has come to be known in the media as the “Boulos Initiative.”⁶

To date, no official document has been released to outline the initiative. However, over recent months, Boulos has focused his actions and statements on the need to resolve political issues over unifying Libya's executive bodies, economic matters concerning the energy and investment sectors, and security issues related to the military establishment. He has not given priority to the complexities surrounding the constitution and elections.

A Tripartite “Libyan” Initiative

Prior to the Trump administration's intervention in the crisis, Presidential Council head Mohamed al-Menfi, House of Representatives Speaker Aguila Saleh, and the head of the High Council of State, Mohammed Takala, had met in Cairo on 10 March 2024. The meeting, held under the auspices of the Arab League, aimed to “resolve points of contention regarding the path to presidential and parliamentary elections.” According to an Arab League statement, they agreed on “the need to form a unified government tasked with overseeing the electoral process, providing essential services to citizens, and unifying sovereign positions.”⁷

The Cairo meeting subsequently served as a reference document for a tripartite initiative involving the heads of the three councils. Key provisions include holding simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections no later than 17 February 2027, in accordance with laws drafted by the “6

⁶ “Boulos: I Gathered Senior Officials from Western and Eastern Libya in Paris for ‘Productive Discussions,’” *Bawabat Al-Wasat*, 5/2/2026, accessed 12/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGTB>.

⁷ “Libya: Al-Menfi, Saleh, and Takala Agree to Form a Unified Government,” *Anadolu Agency*, 10/3/2026, accessed 11/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHIP>.

+ 6 Committee” (formed in March 2026 with six members each from the House of Representatives and the High Council of State). Other measures include preparing a unified budget for 2027 and establishing a new legal framework to oversee the oil, gas, water, and mineral sectors.⁸

Although this initiative has not garnered the same level of political and media attention as the initiatives led by UNSMIL and US Envoy Boulos, Al-Menfi has remained publicly committed to it, viewing it as a means to “shape a consensus-based roadmap that enjoys broad acceptance and lays the foundation for a sustainable political settlement rooted in national partnership, while preserving the state’s unity and sovereignty.”⁹

As part of ongoing coordination among the heads of the three councils regarding their initiative, a meeting is expected to take place soon at the Élysée Palace in Paris to discuss reactivating the 6 + 6 Committee to draft electoral laws, and tasking it with making the necessary amendments to the laws it had previously produced, thereby enabling their implementation.¹⁰

The Return of the UN

As noted above, UNSMIL spearheaded two previous initiatives to resolve the Libyan crisis (Skhirat and Geneva), in consultation with relevant regional and international stakeholders. Neither of these processes coincided with parallel tracks. However, the failure of both UN initiatives to unify the executive, bring about general elections and thus end the transitional phase cast doubt on the UN mission’s ability to implement its proposals and translate them into political, security, and economic realities, given its lack of enforcement mechanisms. The implementation of these tracks remained hostage to the calculations of Libyan factions and the interests of regional and international parties involved in the country’s affairs.

As such, the launch of the Structured Dialogue comes despite the failure of these two previous tracks, from which it differs little, save for the sequencing of its key phases; whereas elections were the culmination of the Skhirat and Geneva tracks, under the Structured Dialogue they serve as the starting point.

Nor does the current situation differ markedly from the security and political contexts surrounding the Skhirat and Geneva tracks. The executive remains divided between east and west, the security landscape is volatile, the social fabric is fractured, the influence of external actors has intensified, and the economic crisis remains unresolved. Furthermore, the UN mission remains unable to devise

⁸ For more on these efforts, see: Ghina Al-Khatib, “Adoption of a New Roadmap... How Did Libya’s Elections Return to the Table?” *Al Jazeera Net*, 18/6/2026, accessed 11/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1D6l>.

⁹ “President Receives Several Ambassadors and Representatives of Diplomatic Missions Accredited to Libya,” Media Office of the President of the Libyan Presidential Council (Facebook), 24/6/2026, accessed 11/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGGZ>.

¹⁰ Osama Ali, “Heads of the Three Libyan Councils Meet in Paris to Discuss the Roadmap,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 8/8/2026, accessed 12/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH7l>.

enforcement mechanisms to compel the factions to adhere to its initiative, regardless of the fact it enjoys the UN Security Council's endorsement.

The UN initiative therefore appears to be entering a phase of undeclared suspension; leaks suggest that the signing of a document concluding the work of the 4 + 4 Committee has been postponed – an implicit sign of difficulties that could lead to the committee's work ending prematurely.

Opportunities Presented by the US Initiative

The Boulos initiative has garnered more attention in the media than the latest UN initiative. Although no official document has been released to lay out how it will work, a close look at the US envoy's statements and activities suggests a focus on unifying Libya's government and executive institutions, as well as addressing oil, energy, and investment portfolios.

Boulos has taken a pragmatic approach to the reality of political and institutional division in Libya, viewing the existing authorities in east and west as a *fait accompli* – a situation governed by complex, overlapping networks of political, economic, regional, and local interests and calculations, alongside the interests of regional and international powers involved in Libyan affairs. He appears to believe that this necessitates preserving the interests and roles of both sides, but within the framework of a unified executive authority. There have been leaks suggesting that Washington is inclined toward the appointment of Saddam Haftar – son and deputy of Khalifa Haftar – as head of the Presidential Council, while retaining Dbeibah as head of government. However, Boulos has not yet publicly named specific individuals for these roles.

The prospect of Saddam Haftar's appointment as head of the Presidential Council faces fierce opposition from influential political and social actors in western Libya. Prominent figures in Misrata – whose military groupings constitute the backbone of the forces aligned with Dbeibah's Government of National Unity – have rejected any move that would lead to the “militarization of the state,” and have emphasized that any solution must take place within a clear constitutional framework, rather than through a “narrow political settlement, arrangements that perpetuate the crisis, or the promotion of unscrupulous figures.” This prompted Boulos to respond by denying the existence of any written initiative or specific terms.¹¹ Furthermore, Saddam appears to be facing objections even from within his own family, whose members have divided up influence over the eastern region.¹²

In contrast to the UN's initiatives to date, the Boulos initiative began with practical steps on the ground. It has also succeeded – for the first time since 2013 – in persuading authorities in both east and west to agree on a unified budget, conduct joint military exercises under the supervision of US

¹¹ “‘Misrata Notables and Elders’: Massad Boulos Did Not Present a Written Initiative, and We Reject the Militarization of the State,” *Bawabat Al-Wasat*, 7/7/2026, accessed 12/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGun>.

¹² “A Rift in Haftar's Camp: ‘Khaled Attacks Boulos's Initiative and Rejects Empowering His Brother Saddam,’” *The Libya Observer*, 9/4/2026, accessed 12/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGV6>.

Africa Command (AFRICOM), and establish a joint operations room linking the military institutions of the two regions.

The US initiative implicitly views elections in Libya not merely as technical or administrative procedures, but as a complex, thorny, and long-term political process of forging a difficult consensus among rival factions, implying that all other steps remain contingent upon the success of this rather shaky undertaking.

From the US administration's perspective, the situation in the Middle East, volatile energy markets, and risks to production and transport routes are key reasons to take a direct interest in Libya, given the country's vast energy reserves. This focus is evident in Washington's emphasis on the oil sector and on Libya's security and stability, with an eye to creating a favourable environment for US companies – as well as in efforts to contain Russian expansion and solidify a military and security presence in a fragile transit zone, in order to counter migration flows and the movements of armed groups linked to regional conflicts. Washington appears to be banking on outreach to regional allies to bolster the initiative's chances of success, while encouraging Türkiye – previously associated with governments based in Tripoli – to engage with the *de facto* authorities in the east as well. The results of this approach have been evident in Ankara's intensified diplomatic moves towards authorities in both east and west, as well as in Egypt's easing of reservations regarding engagement with authorities in the capital.

Although the Boulos initiative has made progress in certain areas, such as finalizing a unified budget and conducting joint military manoeuvres, unifying the executive in the manner Washington is currently promoting faces significant opposition, particularly in the west. The envoy's decision to withhold the names of candidates for Prime Minister and head of the Presidential Council appears intended to allay fears of the militarization of the state and concerns that the entire initiative might devolve into a division of spoils between the Dbeibah and Haftar families. Should these objections persist, it is plausible that the US initiative might maintain its broad framework while bypassing both Haftar and Dbeibah in favour of less controversial figures, effectively presenting all sides with a *fait accompli*. That would be in keeping with the sidelining of both the House of Representatives and the High Council of State since the contours of the US initiative first began to emerge.

Initiative or Manoeuvre?

The meetings between Al-Menfi, Saleh, and Takala are less significant than the UN and US initiatives. Unlike Haftar and Dbeibah, these officials lack tangible military power on the ground. Their influence, particularly that of Saleh, is largely limited to the ability to obstruct legislative or political initiatives. Such obstructionism is irrelevant to the US initiative, as the latter bypasses constitutional and electoral questions to focus directly on unifying the executive, sidelining representative or consultative bodies, as well as infiltrating the House of Representatives and winning over members who have expressed support for the Boulos initiative.

The trio realise that they stand to lose the most from the US initiative, and to a lesser extent, that of the UN. They understand that the balance of power on the ground is not in their favour, and offers them no opportunity to obstruct the process. Accordingly, their proposal of an alternative project is more of a tactical manoeuvre than a serious attempt to find a solution. They are also aware that holding general elections by 17 February 2027 is unrealistic given Libya's fragmented political and security landscape and the absence of both a legislative framework and organizational preparations. Accordingly, the Menfi–Saleh–Takala initiative is unlikely to achieve any significant breakthrough in Libya's crisis-ridden landscape, regardless of an anticipated re-convening in Paris.

Conclusion

Years after the launch of the Skhirat and Geneva tracks, which failed to unify the executive or extricate Libya from its multifaceted crises, the UN mission has put another initiative on the table. However, this move coincides with a US initiative and a third proposal from the heads of the Presidential Council, the House of Representatives, and the High Council of State. While the latter proposal and the UN initiative once again highlight the issue of elections, with all its complexities and controversies, the US is focusing directly on unifying the executive based on the current balance of power, in a manner that safeguards Washington's interests in terms of energy, the economy, and security. Yet the US initiative, which is less concerned with Libya's unity than with entrenching the country's de facto authorities within a stable power-sharing arrangement, faces objections from influential Libyan factions over the militarization of political life and the entrenchment of rule by powerful families. This suggests that while the individuals holding high-ranking positions may change, the broader political trajectory will likely remain unaltered, effectively presenting all stakeholders with a fait accompli.

In any case, various diplomatic moves and initiatives demonstrate that a long-term resolution to the Libyan crisis is impossible in the absence of a national consensus among Libyan elites regarding the structure of the state. Such a consensus is a vital prerequisite for addressing the nature of governance, elections, and other matters in Libya. Hence, the only alternative to national responsibility is one of temporary settlements imposed from outside.