



One year on, the UN-backed government is at a loss

A VIABLE LIBYAN GOVERNMENT MUST BE BUILT FROM THE BOTTOM UP

One year after it took office, Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) has, like previous transition governments, failed to re-establish central authority in the country. Stakeholders both within and outside Libya must acknowledge that power resides in the peripheries of Libya, not at the centre.

Since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in the summer of 2011, several transition governments have failed to establish their rule over Libya. One year after it was sworn in, the GNA is no exception. While Islamic State has recently been defeated in the northern city of Sirte, the GNA remains weak and incapable of

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Libyan transition should build new governance structures in a bottom-up process, working from the peripheries of the country towards the centre.
- The Libyan national dialogue should prioritize bringing together capable local and regional power-brokers, rather than leverage-weak political figures.
- International stakeholders should push regional actors to abstain from pursuing narrow national security policies in Libya via proxies.

There is a growing realization among both Libyan and international stakeholders that the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement is unworkable



The combination of the historical absence of proper state institutions with an international military intervention that crippled whatever remained of Libya's central government, has persistently obstructed attempts to create a new centre of authority in Tripoli.

exercising influence over Libya's real power-brokers, namely the regionally and locally rooted armed groups that effectively govern large swathes of Libya's territory, including the capital.

The absence of central authority

The inability of Libya's internationally backed and Tripoli-based government to gain enough support among the country's key power-brokers, combined with its failure to deliver on the basic needs of the population, is to some extent the result of a shared failure among political decision-makers in Libya and within the international community to recognize the particular conditions of governance in post-Gaddafi Libya, namely that there is no central state to reconstruct.

There is now growing realization among both Libyan and international stakeholders that the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) is unworkable and cannot be implemented in its current form. In the coming period, political decision-makers and stakeholders in the Libyan transition may try to revamp the LPA. In doing so, it will be critical to keep two key factors in mind that explain the absence of central state structures in Libya.

Firstly, the Libyan state has never had a strong centre or a solid base in Tripoli. Libya's colonial and post-colonial trajectories prevented the creation of strong centralized institutions, while facilitating the creation of strong non-state actors. Historically, the country's myriad regions have never been effectively linked together or enabled to act on behalf of a specific power centre. In addition, Libya has never had a strong, collectively shared national identity. In post-Gaddafi Libya, this has been further aggravated by the mistrust and estrangement that many of

Libya's regional actors harboured vis-à-vis the idea itself of a Tripoli-based 'central authority'.

Secondly, the NATO-led military intervention did more than just protect civilians from a potential onslaught from Gaddafi's air force and military in 2011: during the spring and summer of 2011, it experienced considerable mission creep, from 'the protection of civilians' towards 'regime change'. This had the possibly unintended consequence of transforming Libya from an actor in regional power politics in the Maghreb and the Sahel to an arena with which other aspiring and established Middle Eastern and European great powers could engage.

In spite of decades of crippling sanctions and its pariah status in international politics outside the African continent, Gaddafi's Libya remained largely sovereign and capable of defending its borders against any potential aggressions from its neighbours. Moreover, it consistently remained capable of projecting itself into other political arenas, either as a spoiler through its support of rebel organizations and revolutionary forces, such as Western Sahara's Polisario movement, or through the massive funding of development infrastructure in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The NATO military intervention abruptly reversed this. Already in 2011, regional powers like the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and France, as well as neighbouring countries like Egypt and Algeria, were actively seeking to boost their leverage among local Libyan actors, militia leaders and tribal leaders by providing political, military and economic assistance. As in other regional conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the proxy character of the Libyan conflict would not only undermine the ability of local

actors to negotiate long-term ceasefires and peace agreements, it would also fundamentally undermine the ability of local political actors to build a strong central government capable of replacing Gaddafi's regime. The international community must pay full attention to the trend towards "localization" that is currently occurring in Libya and work to incorporate disparate communities and strong peripheries into institution-building processes.

This combination of the historical absence of proper state institutions with an international military intervention that crippled whatever remained of Libya's central government has persistently obstructed attempts to create a new centre of authority in Tripoli. Any attempt to ignore the decentralized and regional nature of power in Libya will eventually fail, no matter how long, inclusive and detailed any dialogue process that may precede it.

Go local

The inability of the GNA to effectively impose itself as a key power broker partially reflects the inability of the

international community to effectively curb the meddling of regional powers in Libyan affairs by proxy. In particular, Egypt's political and military support for the self-styled Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar, in a bid to secure its own frontier region, has undercut the ability of the GNA to operate effectively. The international community should pressure all regional partners to stop interfering in Libya by proxy to ensure that a truly local dynamic of power sharing and peace-making can take root.

However, moving the GNA forward would require a further localization of the process. In the absence of an effective central government, since 2011 locally rooted armed groups and tribes have responded to the legitimate needs for security and stability of members of local communities throughout Libya.

Any attempt to revamp the political transition in Libya should therefore move its point of departure further towards the local level and away from the capital. Rather than basing the transition process on a desire to project governance from Tripoli to the regions and



Forces loyal to Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) rest after clashes with Islamic State in the coastal city of Sirte, some 450 km east of the capital Tripoli © Xinhua/Hamza Turkia

local provinces, it should be based on a model that, inversely, projects power from the region to the centre.

Such a process should be based on bringing key local power-brokers and armed groups to the negotiating table, rather than the leverage-weak political entities brought together in earlier UN-led dialogues. Such a dialogue should include partners capable of controlling large chunks of Libyan territory, of mobilizing substantial support among the inhabitants of these territorial entities, of organizing clear command structures and ensuring disciplined governance and accountability in key areas such as human rights and the rule of law, and of mobilizing the support of broader coalitions of other armed groups in Libya's regions.

In applying these criteria, two actors will be crucial. One is the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its support base in eastern Libya, which remains loyal to the House of Representatives in Tobruk. The other consists of armed groups from the city of Misrata, which are loyal to the local military and municipal councils and to some extent the GNA. Both actors have legitimacy within their own communities, not least since their recent engagement in the fight

against Islamic State and other jihadist groups in and around Benghazi and Sirte, but also because of their track record in providing security and services where the central authorities have failed. Furthermore, they both have leverage among other militias in Libya's western and southern regions.

Involving these two actors could generate a minimal security environment that could underpin an effective political agreement and the formation of a more effective government in Libya.

For any nationwide institution-building process to succeed, it must be driven by a web of relationships between the state and local communities. The institution-building process should therefore combine the current approach with bottom-up initiatives. Proceeding along these lines is, of course, not without its problems and challenges, such as effectively disarming locally and regionally based armed groups and ensuring sufficient executive power in centrally based government institutions. However, combined with a more effective effort to curb regional rivalries, this would provide a pragmatic response to the persistent challenge of governing Libya's peripheries.

Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Senior Researcher, Foreign Policy (rab@diis.dk), Mohamed Eljarh, Non-Resident Fellow, Atlantic Council (MEljarh@atlanticcouncil.org) & Hans Lucht, Senior Researcher, Global Transformations (halu@diis.dk)

Cover photo: From left: Mohammed Chouaib, head of delegation from the House of Representatives in Tobruk, Fayeze Sarraj, Libyan Prime minister and Dr. Saleh Almkhozom, Second Deputy Chairman of the Libyan General National Congress, after signing the UN-brokered peace agreement on 17 December 2015 in Sikkhrat, Morocco © AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar

