



Europe can't ignore Libya

by Luigi Scazzieri, 2 August 2021

Libya has a new unity government, but the country could easily slip back into conflict. In order to avoid this happening, Europeans should increase their stabilisation efforts.

Libya has been embroiled in a multi-phase civil war since the overthrow of long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi by Western-backed rebels in 2011. The country has been split between rival administrations since 2014, while militias and lawlessness have proliferated, oil production has fallen and infrastructure has been destroyed. Egypt, Russia, Turkey and the UAE became involved in Libya, to gain influence and profit from the country's oil and its business opportunities. Meanwhile, [European countries have pursued competing approaches to stabilising Libya](#), and at times even backed different sides in the conflict. Libya became a major jumping-off point for irregular migration to Europe, a base for extremist groups and a source of regional instability. In February this year, there was a glimmer of hope when Libyans agreed to form a provisional Government of National Unity (GNU). But Europeans can't be complacent: Libya could easily plunge back into conflict.

The formation of the GNU was made possible by an October 2020 ceasefire agreement that halted military commander Khalifa Haftar's bid to overthrow the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Egypt, the UAE and Russia supported Haftar, while Turkey supported the GNA. The fighting ended in a stalemate, which encouraged all parties to agree to a ceasefire. The ceasefire in turn unblocked UN efforts to broker a political settlement. In February 2021, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), a group of Libyans selected by the UN, agreed to form a provisional unity government to ferry the country to elections in December. The LPDF selected Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, a businessman, as prime minister. Dbeibah has close connections to Turkey, but his government included representatives from across the country and was also acceptable to Haftar, Egypt, the UAE and Russia. In March there was a peaceful transfer of power from Libya's rival governments to the GNU, with Libya's parliament voting to approve the new government.

After years of divisions over how to approach Libya, with Italy backing the GNA and France supporting Haftar, Europeans are now united in wanting to strengthen the GNU. EU leaders [such as](#) Italy's Mario Draghi, Greece's Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Spain's Pedro Sánchez and European Council President Charles Michel have visited Tripoli to bolster the GNU's authority. Many European countries and the EU itself have re-opened their representations in Libya. Germany has tried to maintain momentum behind the plan

to hold elections, hosting an international conference in Berlin in June 2021. And Europeans are very keen to deepen co-operation with Libya in combating irregular migration. In particular, Italy, which has a medical and military training mission in western Libya and provides bilateral training to the coastguard there, has been pushing the EU to [do more to reduce migration from Libya](#), worried by the increase in the number of crossings. The EU's Operation Sophia trained Libya's coastguard for around three years, despite its horrible human rights record, so that it could pick up migrants in Libyan waters and thus stop them from reaching Europe. But in 2020 Europeans replaced Sophia with operation Irini, whose main task was enforcing a UN arms embargo on Libya. Irini has not been training the Libyan coastguard, even though this is also within its mandate, because it does not have an agreement with the Libyan authorities. Many supporters of the GNA thought that Irini favoured Haftar during the conflict because it was a naval operation, whereas Haftar was mostly supplied by land and air.

Europeans should look beyond their immediate interest in reducing migration if they want to stabilise Libya. The country is still in a very fragile state and European interests will not be served if it slips back into conflict. Libya has seen false starts before: the GNU's predecessor was set up in 2016 thanks to UN mediation, but it was unable to consolidate its authority and Libya returned to civil war. Today, the GNU's authority [does not extend](#) to the whole country. Haftar remains very influential in the east and there is little sign that he has given up on his ambitions to rule the country. Many of Libya's MPs are based in the east and are still under Haftar's influence. After approving the GNU, the parliament has been unconstructive, and has not been able to agree on a budget. Even in much of western Libya, the GNU's authority remains limited, with powerful militias only nominally under its control.

The presence of foreign troops in Libya is another factor of instability. Foreign forces were supposed to be removed after the ceasefire but, according to the UN, [20,000](#) remain in Libya. These include Turkish forces; mercenaries from the Russian private military company Wagner, widely regarded in the West as a surrogate of the Russian armed forces; Syrian mercenaries; and mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa. The US military has also published photos of [Russian jets](#) in Libya. The UAE does not have forces in Libya but it has supplied Haftar and, according to the US Defence Intelligence Agency, [has funded](#) Wagner's presence in Libya. There are few incentives for foreign powers to remove their forces or their proxies as long as others retain theirs. Withdrawing proxies or troops would mean losing influence over Libya. Russia wants to acquire valuable bases in Libya that could allow it to project power more effectively in the Mediterranean. And in Turkey's case, support for western Libya complements [its claim to a large maritime zone in the eastern Mediterranean](#).

Both Haftar's enduring influence in the east and the continuing presence of foreign forces makes it hard to see how free and fair elections can be held in December. Additionally, Libyans [disagree](#) over whether the elections should be only for parliament, with MPs appointing a president, or whether the president should be directly elected. There are also arguments over whether Haftar should be allowed to stand for office after his attempt to overthrow the GNA. And Libyans disagree over whether it is necessary to hold a referendum on a draft constitution before the elections, or whether elections can be held under a provisional constitution. According to UN envoy to Libya Ján Kubiš, many Libyans ["are not ready to walk the talk"](#) on elections. Haftar has [said he supports elections](#), but it is unlikely he would accept a result he did not like. Libya's parliament has little desire to hold elections, because they would lead to its replacement. And Dbeibah [probably has an incentive](#) to delay elections so that he can consolidate his authority. Many external actors also have little reason to push for elections. Russia, Turkey, the UAE and Egypt favoured the formation of the GNU because it was acceptable to them, and elections risk altering the existing fragile balance. European countries and the US are pushing for elections, but some leaders

might come to think that Dbeibah can bring some stability to Libya if he remains in charge for some time beyond the expiry of his mandate in December.

These challenges mean that Europeans should not be complacent about Libya's political trajectory. Genuine disagreements between Libyans on elections cannot be resolved by external actors. And as long as disagreements persist, it would be more damaging to hold elections than to delay them. Europeans and the US should redouble their political support for the UN mediation mission in its efforts to drive the election process forward. They should be ready to sanction entities and individuals that are undermining UN efforts. At the same time, Europeans and the US should do what they can to ensure that foreign forces are removed. In April, the UN Security Council agreed to set up a mission to monitor the ceasefire. But, based on current plans, the mission would only have [60 unarmed observers](#), which is unlikely to be enough. The EU, the UK and the US should push for the mission to have enough resources to credibly police the ceasefire and identify who is responsible for violations. A substantial monitoring mission would make post-election violence less likely and facilitate the withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya as planned.

It is unrealistic to think that all foreign forces can be removed quickly. In particular Haftar is very reliant on mercenaries – and their withdrawal could create a vacuum and destabilise the east, which worries his backers. Nevertheless, a partial withdrawal of foreign forces should be possible. Russia has no intention of giving up its influence, and says it does not control Wagner, but it [says it supports a withdrawal of foreign forces](#), if this does not upset the balance of power within Libya. Moscow is not firmly wedded to Haftar, but has always maintained [links to both sides](#) in the conflict, and it has developed [close links to the GNU](#). Turkey refuses to withdraw its own troops, but [it is open to withdrawing Syrian mercenaries](#). The UAE is keen to maintain good relations with the Biden administration and could show some flexibility – Abu Dhabi has shown a [willingness to engage with the GNU](#), suggesting that it is looking beyond Haftar. A recent easing of tensions between Turkey and Egypt, together with political pressure from Europe and the US, could help secure agreement on a partial withdrawal.

Libya can only be truly stable if the power of militias is curtailed. Once a more permanent ceasefire is in place and most foreign forces have left Libya, Europeans should be ready to help the GNU to disarm militias and establish regular security forces. The GNU might also agree to let the EU train the Libyan coastguard again. If training resumes, Europeans should place much greater focus on vetting and accountability to ensure that they do not inadvertently create new militias, and that the coastguard ceases to commit human rights abuses. In the medium-term, the EU should take the lead in helping Libya undertake economic reforms to grow its private sector, diversify its economy and sign an association and trade agreement to improve access to European markets.

The creation of the GNU presents Europeans with an opportunity to work together to stabilise Libya. If they don't, the country could easily return to conflict. This would further destabilise the wider Sahel region, making life easier for terrorists and smugglers. The fact that Chad's President Idriss Déby was in April [killed by rebels based in Libya](#) highlighted the country's role as an exporter of instability. The prospect of a permanent Russian presence in Libya should also concern Europe; Moscow might be tempted to use its influence in Libya to manipulate the flow of migrants to Europe. Renewed conflict could also lead to the re-emergence of splits between European countries. If the GNU became very close to Turkey, France and Greece might pivot to backing its opponents. European divisions would only leave space for other actors, some of them hostile to European interests, to become more influential.

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