

Libya: General Overview of the Country

Tarek Megerisi

Policy Fellow, Middle East & North Africa team
European Council on Foreign Relations, London

It has been one of those years for Libya in which a decade's worth of events have taken place. Today, Libya is filled with talk of elections, anxiety over political misconduct and the tentative hope of a reconciliation process. A jarring change from only 12 months ago where a pall of foreboding hung over Libya and the broader Mediterranean. Then, Tripoli was in the midst of a war started by a renegade military man with dreams of autocracy – Khalifa Haftar – and the Turkish armed forces had arrived to help Libya's government defend a city housing over 1.5 million souls. The wider ramifications of Haftar's war, the Pandora's box it opened, and Turkey's corresponding intervention still ripple through the eastern Mediterranean today. In fact, the currents stirred by those events retain the capacity to wash away Libya's fragile peace, as do the looming unresolved grievances around what to do with Haftar. The journey to Libyan elections this December, and the integrity of the event itself will determine whether Libya's division will fossilize and a new proxy conflict begin, or if a sovereign, stable Libya can finally emerge from a decade of revolutionary anarchy.

The Turkish Tide of War

Turkey arrived in Libya right in the nick of time. At that point, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) – an umbrella term for the collection of tribal militias, Salafist fighters, foreign mercenaries and battalions belonging to children of the organization's leader Field Marshal Haftar – had begun encroaching into

greater Tripoli. After almost a year of stagnation, the frontline deployment of Russian mercenary organization the Wagner Group – belonging to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin – had made an immediate difference and drove the LAAF within touching distance of Tripoli proper. In their desperation, after prolonged outreach for assistance from Europeans and the United States (US) proved fruitless, Libya's government turned to Turkey. A security pact was tabled that would effectively buy Libya a Turkish saviour. The price was a corresponding agreement delineating maritime boundaries between the two countries, something Turkey had been pushing for since late 2018, but which Libya was loathed to sign, aware of the enmity it would trigger in Europe.

As predicted, the maritime agreement between Libya and Turkey inspired considerably more European activity on Libya than the thousands of casualties and the widespread devastation of the war which led to them. Greece furiously kicked out the Libyan Ambassador, and France (one of Haftar's core supporters) led the condemnations of Turkey and the deal at EU level.

Nevertheless, Turkey delivered on their deal. They quickly deployed thousands of Syrian mercenaries to stem Haftar's advance, whilst working on a more strategic response. Next came air defences to protect against the LAAF's use of Chinese drones, and then Turkey's own drones entered the fray. In a dynamic which would be repeated in Syria and then Nagorno-Karabakh, a drone-led military strategy devastated the LAAF and their hopes for Tripoli. Months after the deal was struck, Turkey's support caused the LAAF to implode. Haftar lost all command and control as his forces routed. In a 48-hour window Libya's government forces had chased them over 1,500 miles away from Tripoli.

War & Peace

Turkey had saved Libya from a fate of messy urban conflict, only to deliver it straight into a frozen conflict with Russia. Even though the LAAF had dissolved under Haftar, the host of countries who had supported him still needed a vehicle to advance their interests. So, Russia dispatched jets to halt the advance of government forces in the central Libyan city of Sirte and warned Turkey not to advance any further. Wagner Group mercenaries dug in to form a new front line, and Sudanese mercenaries were delivered by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to buttress these positions, as LAAF troops trickled back to Sirte now they knew they were safe from Turkish drones.

The collapse of Haftar, and the LAAF, was the perfect opportunity for Germany, the US and others who had supported the UN process for stabilizing Libya to make genuine progress and unify political and security establishments without Haftar's cynical interventions – i.e., his relentless attempts to empower himself at the expense of his country. With his army in tatters, and Libya's divide as artificial as ever, given the Russian enforcement which sustained it, this was a prime yet fleeting opportunity, which passed in silence. Instead, Egypt tentatively advanced a ceasefire announcement premised on accepting the LAAF as Libya's army and calling for a surrender of arms to them. The Cairo declaration was enthusiastically supported by Europeans as an olive branch, and yet the war of words between Egypt and Turkey continued escalating. Eventually Egyptian President Sisi threatened to send in the Egyptian army should Libya's government try to reclaim Sirte. But by then, the threat was unnecessary, the division had been reconstituted and Haftar had been salvaged.

United Nations' Art of Peace

As Libya's war and the positions of its international belligerents gradually froze, the new landscape offered the opportunity for the UN to advance its shaky peace process. Reborn in the Berlin Conference of January 2020 – where Libya's intervening states were corralled by Germany and the UN into signing up to a new diplomatic framework for Libya engagement – the process initially appeared dead on arrival. For even as these states were signing the page in

Berlin, their operatives were breaking UN Security Council resolutions to prosecute Libya's conflict ever more harshly. The virtue of the Berlin Conference, however, was not in the conclusions that nobody was willing to enforce but in the follow-up process which everyone wanted to remain a part of. The international parties continued meeting in a series of thematic working groups to pursue progress on the agreed conclusions. Although little tangible was accomplished by these groups, the format and familiarity it created between nations who rarely share a table, created an environment which conduced Libya's war into freezing rather than inflaming and Turkey to start a quiet rapprochement with Egypt.

Meanwhile, the UN pressed on with its intra-Libyan work built out across political, economic and military tracks. Unfortunately, Haftar's attempt to seize power had to be settled one way or another for peace to have a chance. A real opportunity only came once stalemate had been achieved. The UN was further emboldened by support from the US, which had grown increasingly uncomfortable with Russia's entrenchment in military sites just hundreds of kilometres across the Mediterranean from NATO bases in Sicily. Military-to-military talks finally convened four months after the war had ended and produced a ceasefire agreement shockingly quickly. Much like the Berlin Conference conclusions, the agreement was lauded for the precedent it set rather than for its feasibility. Always unlikely headline calls to remove foreign mercenaries were reduced to a mockery by Russians who refused government-aligned participants landing rights when they tried to attend follow-up meetings in Sirte. Nevertheless, their progress created a demand for similar political advance and the creation of a unified government that could drive the agreement's implementation. So, the UN crafted a new body – the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) – carefully selecting political representatives – leading actors and key groups of parliamentarians – to try and engineer a power-sharing agreement, alongside a sprinkling of civil society representatives for legitimation. Political progress was not as quick however, and despite an early announcement that the unity government would essentially be caretakers until elections on 24 December 2021, the winds of change stirred considerable disruption as all parties jostled for prime position. The planned outcome, anticipated by Libyans and international stakeholders alike, was the Speaker

of the Parliament Aguileh Salah, as a civilian and less divisive face than some of the stakeholders who en-joined in Haftar's war, and Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha, as a representative of those who repelled him. Yet, Haftar and other aspirational politicians fought back through a series of gambits across Libya's military patchwork and economic sector. Four months later, the LPDF finally appointed a new unity Prime Minister and President, and to everyone's surprise it was neither the two anticipated candidates, nor any of those who had so publicly tried to supplant them.

Vested Interests Strike Back

Libya's new authorities had seemingly surprised everyone, yet some were more disappointed than others. The new Prime Minister, Abdul-Hamid Dabaiba, had a long history with Turkey stretching back to the Gaddafi-era where he helped his uncle orchestrate social construction projects as part of a conglomerate notorious for its corruption. His associate, President Mohammed Menfi, had been a largely innocuous MP since the revolution and was best known for being the ambassador that Greece had once expelled.

Amidst very few talks on elections, but lots on reconstruction, Dabaiba pieced together the largest government since Libya's revolution, involving 35 appointments, mostly provided by key parliamentary caucuses to ensure the Parliament's support. Haftar, despite helping to swing the LPDF in Dabaiba's favour, did not get the key positions he was promised. When Saleh, still bitter about losing a presidential chair he had long lusted over, tried to block the approval process, heavy foreign pressure convinced him otherwise. Despite mixed feelings from many states, and Libyans making weighty accusations that Dabaiba had bought the votes needed to win, driving this behind the scenes was strong American pressure. The US, after all, still saw the culmination of the UN's roadmap to elections as the best way to get rid of Russia in the region and keep leading from behind. As the government has settled in, familiar trends have resurfaced. Turkey is cashing in on its intervention, securing over ten agreements to engage in Libya's reconstruction across numerous sectors. Meanwhile, its security sector reform programme continues to reshape western Libya's militia scene. Russia has strong ties to many key ministers who were techno-

crats of the old regime and will exploit this to gain contracts in energy and infrastructure, which Dabaiba hopes will encourage Wagner's withdrawal. Meanwhile, Haftar-supporting states like the UAE, and those hostile to Turkey, like Greece and Egypt, are empowering Saleh at Menfi's expense. If things continue apace, some countries will deal through Aguileh and associated oil and security actors in eastern Libya, while others will work with Dabaiba, an oil minister, and the forces of western Libya. Meanwhile, stagnation of the military to military discussions and reluctance to unify forces and resolve the Haftar question keeps the possibility for renewed violence alive. Separately, many political and military actors are being encouraged not to contest the status quo but rather await December's elections. If elections are mishandled, the many grievances will boil over.

The Return of Elections

As the cacophony of construction returns to Tripoli, alongside the whispers of conspirators, and the intermittent whirrs of jet engines over Sirte's frontlines, everything is building up to the crescendo of December's elections. Dabaiba is desperately trying to convince Turkey, Russia, Egypt and others that elections can be delayed and divisions can be healed by the power of business. Opposing this, Marshal Haftar is swapping fatigues for a suit. Whilst hoping his backers ensure his LAAF "wins" any military unification, he is already campaigning by holding rallies and making outlandish reconstruction promises of his own. Many others, but most notably the Russians, are also quietly laying groundwork for December, even after finally securing the release of Wagner operatives who had been arrested by Tripoli in 2018 for electioneering. They have long invested in bringing back the old regime and see this as their moment. What hope for peace is there in Libya? If the US's singular focus on elections can broaden to ensure elections are protected, engaging and truly free then they might just stymie all the side plots. The Libyan people, despite rarely being engaged on Libyan politics, are just tired. Tired of the corruption, of foreign forces, of pervasive violence and the insecurity of living in poverty in a country exporting over a million barrels of oil on a bad day. In Libya, the popular route seems to be the only policy route left to real stability.