

## First strengthening the centrist political platform in Libya and then holding elections: difficult political processes in a failed state

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### News

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Monthly Forecast for November 2017 mentions that the UNSC is expected to receive briefings on Libya from Special Representative to Libya Ghassan Salamé. The briefings will cover the recent highly problematic situation in Libya and focus on a possible resumption of political talks. Seen from a UN-perspective it is the hope that the legally elected government of Libya, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA, the UN-initiated attempt at forming a national unity-government) can be brought closer together – and that it will be possible to avoid what more and more points in the direction of a military takeover by Commander in Chief Khalifa Haftar, leader of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA).

### Summary

The UNSC Monthly Forecast for November 2017 characterizes a Libyan reality, according to which it is urgent to stabilize the situation.<sup>1</sup> There is a need for functioning governing institutions and the UN-initiated GNA has never really been able to gather popular support. In the midst of a chaotic reality in Libya it is important to discuss how to get political processes restarted, so a kind of normality can be re-established.

The difficult manoeuvre for the UN is how to strengthen the support for the GNA, while also involving other relevant parties in the complex Libyan political reality, in particular the HoR and Haftar. The article argues that rather than speeding up elections it seems wise to concentrate on strengthening what might be left of centrist political powers in Libya. Hopefully it is not too late. Many Libyans will probably prefer a strong-man solution to continued anarchy and in the recent situation, where Haftar and the LNA together with allied militias seem to dominate large parts of Libya, a de facto take-over is getting closer.

### Key Words

Libya, Government of National Accord, House of Representatives, UN roadmap, elections.

<sup>1</sup> The UNSC meetings will also include briefings from the chair of the Libya Sanctions Committee, Ambassador Olof Skoog (Sweden). See UN Security Council Report, "November 2017 Monthly Forecast. Libya/Security Challenges in the Mediterranean," (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2017).

## Analysis:

### Introduction

Throughout 2017 it has been discussed in Libya when and under what conditions elections should be held. The need for establishing well-functioning governing institutions is urgent and ideally speaking one might expect that a round of elections could clear the air and lead to political improvements. However, the question is if elections are the way ahead in a Libya, which since 2012-13 has developed into a failed state with two competing political centres, and an increasingly dominant Haftar, who in mid-October stated that the “size of Libya is 1,760,000 square kilometres. The army is currently in control of 1,730,000 square kilometres. There is only a little left.”<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing it seems that this is an exaggeration, not least because large areas in Libya are controlled by local militias, who in some cases support or work together with Haftar. But it cannot be ruled out that the ambitious military leader, who more or less also seems to control the legally elected HoR government in eastern Libya, will move into Tripoli thereby putting further pressure on the UN-supported GNA, led by Fayeza Serraj. Some commentators indicate that it more and more looks as if Haftar is positioning himself as a coming president of Libya, following possible elections in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Or that he simply will seize power and then (re-)establish a military dictatorship in Libya.

### The Libyan turmoil and the UN roadmap

The elections in Libya in 2012 and 2014 ended in two very different ways. The first national elections after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi resulted in the formation of a legislative assembly, the General National Council (GNC), and selected a prime minister and a cabinet. The whole situation in Libya following the elections in July 2012 pointed in the direction of a positive development, which left optimism among Libyans as well as among regional and international actors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Libya Herald reporters, "Haftar Claims LNA Now Controls Most of Libya," *Libya Herald* 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Mannoichi, "Analysis: After Sabratha Battle, Scramble for Western Libya Is On," *Middle East Eye*, 25 October (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Seeberg, "Challenges for the EU's Strategic Interests in Post-Qadhafi Libya. Perspectives for European-Libyan Cooperation," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 1 (2014).

Already more than a year before the second elections, which took place in June 2014, confrontations where militiamen besieged key Libyan ministries erupted in Tripoli. Gradually the militias became dominant in Tripoli and after the elections, in which only 18% of the electorate took part, the legally appointed HoR was displaced to Tobruk, while a new self-appointed GNC based on a number of militias, most of them with an Islamist background, was proclaimed in Tripoli.

In 2015 the UN intervened by arranging a series of meetings, aiming at finding a solution to the critical situation. The meetings took place throughout 2015 and 2016, and invited both representatives from the HoR and the unofficial GNC. Some of the gatherings were held in the Moroccan town Skhirat, and it was the ambition to bring together the different parties and establish a platform for a restarting of a democratic development in Libya. The Skhirat-agreement created a kind of preliminary governing body consisting of the GNA, a Presidential Council (PC, with Fayez Serraj as official Chairman) and the High Council of State (HC).<sup>4</sup> The GNA was never in reality recognized by the HoR and the GNC. However, some individual members of the two rivalling governments in Tobruk and Tripoli took part in the talks in Skhirat and for a while the UN-initiated undertaking raised hopes.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately the initiative has never really been able to attract popular support in Libya. The reasons seems to be twofold: first of all it is seen as a foreign intervention, which not has been asked for by the Libyans. Secondly, because the existing political structures didn't want to hand over power to a foreign, imposed institution, which might tend to diminish their own hard-fought power. Because of this rivalry between the HoR and the GNC the international community, including the EU, had difficulties in finding an adequate policy for Libya.<sup>6</sup>

The UN-backed GNA-initiative has met official support both from the US, the EU, and regional powers, but in reality the international interventions have become more contradictory, for instance in the sense that some of the Libyan neighbouring states, fearing that the UN-initiative might maintain the influence of the self-proclaimed GNC

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<sup>4</sup> Roberto Aliboni, "A Hard Diplomatic Transition in Libya: What Response from the EU and the 5 + 5 Dialogue," ed. Roberto Aliboni, et al., vol. Policy Study 2, *Conflict in Libya: A Multidimensional Crisis. State of Play and Paths Towards a Sustainable Peace* (Barcelona: European Institute of of the Mediterranean, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Watanabe, "Libya's Furure: Uncertain, Despite a Political Agreement," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Seeberg, "Challenges for the EU's Strategic Interests in Post-Qadhafi Libya. Perspectives for European-Libyan Cooperation," *ibid.* 21, no. 1 (2014).

and thereby indirectly the Islamists, tend to support Haftar. France, Russia, the UK and the US have lent support to Haftar in his struggle against Jihadist groups in Libya. This might in itself be a legitimate cause, but again with a tendency to strengthening the LNA and Haftar at the expense of the UN-platform. As stated by Roberto Aliboni, "if support tied to counterterrorism is not framed in a coherent strategy serving both anti-terrorism and UN mediation, the latter may be strongly hurt by the former."<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion and perspectives

The Libyan political realities have become almost incomprehensible and created living conditions which for most Libyans are highly problematic.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it seems like a good idea to follow the UN-suggested roadmap, namely in the first place to carry on with the difficult process of securing a higher level of Libyan support for results of the Skhrirat-agreements, secondly to arrange conferences involving all major political players, thirdly to hold a referendum on a Libyan constitution and fourthly to hold parliamentary and presidential elections.

Obviously the initial stages of the roadmap are important, namely to aim at creating a strong centrist platform for discussions about political progress in Libya. It might be wise not to hurry too much with holding elections, in order not to risk another disastrous situation like in 2014, where the elections led to the confrontation between the HoR and the GNC. In other words: rather than speeding up elections it seems to be a better idea to concentrate on strengthening what might be left of centrist political powers in Libya. Hopefully it is not too late. Many Libyans probably will prefer a strong-man solution to continued anarchy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Aliboni., p. 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> Hanspeter Mattes, "Libya since 2011: Political Transformation and Violence," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Rhiannon Smith and Lachlan Wilson, "Libya: A Stalled Un Roadmap and the Coming Battle for Tripoli," *Middle East Eye*, 25 November (2017).

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