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The Future of the Libyan Quagmire: Challenges and Prospects

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The Future of the Libyan Quagmire: Challenges and Prospects

Murat Yeşiltaş¹

Introduction

Ever since the February 17 Revolution in 2011, Libya has gone through various phases of turmoil, instability, power struggle and meddling by international actors. The political and security landscape in the country has been heating up since 2020, as the political process proceeds. However, Libya remains fragile due to the many potential challenges and risks, while external players demand sustainable solutions and a clear pathway for the future. Since the pre-revolution period, many countries have had various interests in Libya, and have pursued different policies toward the country both during Gadhafi's rule and after the revolution. Without any doubt, the various policies conducted by many countries toward Libya have had a considerable impact on the way things have unfolded there, especially after the revolution—so much so that it is inconceivable to analyze the current situation in Libya without referring to the interventions by both regional and global actors.

Needless to say, there were and still are certain differences between the nature and extent of the policies pursued by respective countries toward Libya. While the policies of major international players have influenced the dynamics in the country to a great extent, the policies of regional players toward Libya have had a relatively complex impact compared to the former. Likewise, while policies

and interventions by certain countries have been constructive, i.e., have aimed at maintaining stability, eradicating differences among competing parties, building a representative political structure, etc., some policies and interventions have been highly destructive, fomenting unrest and deepening sources of conflict.

Given the extent and nature of the policies pursued by many actors toward Libya, there is a need to understand how each of those actors views Libya; what their motivations, intentions and visions are; what they are trying to achieve by implementing certain policies and making certain interventions. In other words, since the current conundrum in Libya is to a great extent the result of certain policies as well as certain interventions made by a number of external actors, it is mandatory to understand the essence of these policies and interventions in order to build a national strategy, which would assist Libyan decision-makers in benefiting from those policies and interventions for the good and interests of Libya. In this way, Libya would be saved from further conflict and instability on the one hand, and ready for a political solution in much better condition, on the other.

There is a continuous risk associated with the current involvement of multiple actors in the Libyan arena: their presence can exacerbate the situation and result in Libya entering a stalemate, prolonging any viable political solution in the short and medium terms. Some of these actors are regional, such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); others transcend regional boundaries to include players such as France, Russia and Turkey. All parties perceive a vested interest in continuing to pursue their endeavors in Libya; hence, the risk is that their agendas might culminate in the total collapse of efforts for meaningful solution to overcoming the current impasse. The matter is further complicated by the multiplicity of overlapping and non-overlapping agendas. The parties involved in the conflict are not in concert with one another; they

are all engaged in a distinct understanding of interest, thus diminishing the prospect of a compromise.

In addition to the foreign actors present in Libya, one must consider the internal actors and the stratification among them as well. Libya's political forces often lack cohesion and are not monochrome formations.² Indeed, internal political actors are often divided even when they are seemingly working for the same goals. This has been made clear by the recent political process in the country, which initially appeared to stem from a singular political motive that has since branched out to include influential foreign actors as well as influential actors within Libya itself. These internal actors and the subdivisions among them cannot be ignored when providing a comprehensive image of what is really being witnessed in Libya.

By focusing on the structural and conjectural determinants of the Libyan question, this paper seeks to explain the local, regional and international dynamics to make sense of the future of the Libyan question. In the first section, the paper analyzes local/national, regional and international dynamics by taking into consideration the current political situation as well as the changing dynamics of the political landscape in the post-Berlin period. In the second section, the study explains the question of how local, regional and international dynamics impact the very nature of Libya's political, security and geopolitical challenges, particularly those that have been taking place in the post-Berlin period. In the final section, the study explores the ways in which these different types of challenges may shape the Libyan question in the near future.

Dynamics of the Libyan Crisis in the Post-Berlin Era

Since 2011, Libya has undergone significant transformation and multiple challenges in both the political and military spheres.³ The role of external actors has been extremely important in this process. However, internal dynamics have also shaped the nature of post-revolutionary developments in Libya. This doesn't necessarily mean that external factors are not important. Rather, it underlines the complex nature of the local context, in which divergent political agendas and competing narratives concerning the solution are discursively and practically struggling against each other, ultimately shaping the country's entire internal political, military and societal dynamics.

To make sense of the true nature of the current situation in Libya, then, the dynamics that affect the current political landscape as well as future projections concerning the Libyan question should first be underlined. There are several dynamics that can be utilized as an optic for analysis in discerning the current issues affecting the Libyan situation.

Local and National Dynamics

First are the local and national dynamics, which denote political associations in Libya and how they impact the security landscape of the political and military conflict. At play in Libya's local and national dynamics are historical and conjectural patterns that produce major effects on deep territorial fragmentation, which also establish rival camps and provoke many small-scale conflicts of varying intensity raging across the country. The political land-

scape in Libya since 2011 has been highly fragmented, localized and fluid, with connections and overlap between localities, regions, tribes, ethnicities, interests and ideologies. The main division is between the socio-political and military forces that support continued pro-revolutionary changes, and the anti-revolutionary forces that try to maintain their dominant position over the local and national political spectrum. Beyond the general differences between Libya's three main regions (the West, East and South), local communities have also been fundamental actors in the country since 2011.

In this sense, political dynamics should be considered the main domain in which different political, military and tribal actors are struggling to shape the Libyan political landscape from their own perspectives and in accordance with their own strategic priorities. The main problem that persists is the lack of a common understanding regarding the future of Libya in the context of the structure of the state, including a constitution, an election system and the way in which the Libyan political scene should function in the context of national and regional political struggle. More importantly, divergences over the conception of politics, power and legitimacy, among tribal, regional, Islamic, civil and urban political organizations and state-like institutions are heavily shaping the very nature of current local and national determinants in Libya. Articulated as such, three different but strongly interrelated players should be highlighted. The first and most important power center is the capital city of Tripoli, whose dynamics are primarily shaped by Tripolitan political and military actors, and where members of the National Unity Government became legitimate and responsible actors in the post-Berlin era. Compared to the formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA) under President Fayez al-Sarraj, who served as the Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya and Prime Minister from 2016 to 2021 under the Libyan Political Agreement, the GNU4 was

established in accordance with the local and national dynamics that also represent national, regional and international wills, first and foremost to prevent the continuation of armed conflict and to maintain the ceasefire between the warrior armed groups. Ultimately, the main goals of the new government were to facilitate the election on December 24, 2021, and to address the immediate needs of the Libyan public.

Even though Libya's pro-revolutionary players are not homogeneous over the political discourse on many issues, they still represent the main political center that will directly affect the military and political configurations in Libya. Against the pro-revolutionary camp, the second political and military camp is that of Haftar and his supporters, who continue to hold sway in the Eastern regions of the country. The House of Representatives is also major actors in this area. It seems that two main power centers, one in Tripoli and the other in Benghazi, are still significantly influencing local and national dynamics, the old yet newly emerging group of players who locate themselves as the third significant actors. The second son of Muammar Gaddafi, Saif al-Islam, is mobilizing public relations and making diplomatic attempts to become an alternative power center between Tripoli and Benghazi. Even though it is not possible to take Libya back for Saif, he and his local supporters may become a key bloc in the coming election, since the local tribal dynamics are favoring his return as a political player. In addition to the major power centers, local tribal dynamics have the potential to change the situation on the ground, particularly with regard to the election process.

These groupings may be stratified further, in that their internal dynamics are not uniform. The Western and Eastern camps in Libya are not homogenous entities; rather they are constituted by distinct political formations, factions and groupings. Power struggles to shape the intra-internal dynamics of the Libyan conflict,

and hence the political process, are ongoing. For example, while the Western block is militarily strong and well-organized, particularly following Turkey's training program in the security sector, they are not politically united under the same directive and political narrative. Differing desires within the political game and various local opportunities make these political and military actors more open to alternative alignment structures; over time, this has resulted in the weakness of the Western block against Haftar. The same assessment is valid for the Eastern players.

In addition to political dynamics, security dynamics are also significantly important. Libya is a major security equation for many reasons. The country has become over-securitized over the last decade, yet this has not resulted in stability. Divergent actors have vested security concerns in Libya, which has caused the proliferation of foreign military actors in the country. Therefore, the country is in dire need of security sector reform and the reassertion of security practices from credible and competent authorities. In order to overcome the problems emanating from the lack of efficient security and military architecture across the country and to unify all of the Libyan military institutions, sweeping reforms are needed; yet the willingness to restructure the security sector before the election seems to be difficult to achieve, since Haftar still enjoys the support of external actors and wants to maintain his superior military position over the Libyan army. The 5+5 Joint Military Committee is perceived as the mechanism through which to build a unified security structure, although so far the only significant achievement of the committee has been to agree on a permanent ceasefire following pressure from the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). After the establishment of the GNU, the Committee has achieved very little—as evident in its failure to open the Misrata-Sirte coastal road.⁵

External Dynamics

While local and national dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the current geopolitical situation across Libya, regional and international determinants are equally important for the Libyan question. Although the Berlin process brought relative stability, prevented the escalation of internal conflict and contained the spillover effect of the Libyan military conflict into neighboring regions, geopolitical competition among regional and international players has continued to shape the post-Berlin strategic environment in Libya. The main reason behind the Berlin deal's inability to bring real stability and harmony is the lack of comprehensive consensus among national actors concerning the political, military and economic process of the post-conflict period. It should be sharply underscored that the external actors have been acting according to the realities on the ground, rather than behaving consistently with the post-Berlin arrangement. Therefore, the regional and international players' conflicting priorities are strategically significant in Libya, and ultimately shape the country's future as the main external dynamics.

In this regard, regional dynamics are crucial. Libya is currently stratified by an extreme sense of regionality, wherein the legitimate government of Tripoli is facing a regional insurrection from Haftar-controlled territory in the East. The Libyan Question is skewed by several regional and international players, which are best elaborated upon based on their ability to project influence. External players such as Egypt, Turkey, the UAE and France are all significant in Libya. This is primarily due to the lack of the United States' serious engagement in the Libyan Question and Russia's limited capacity in projecting influence. The contradiction in the U.S. strategy is that it opposes the Russian military presence and, at the same time, remains silent regarding the UAE strategy, which undermines the possibility of constructing a common understanding.

The external powers can be categorized as negative or constructive with regard to their engagements and impact on the conflict. The negative external players are headed by the UAE, which is the party most invested in the Libyan debacle in this camp. The UAE has continuously provoked Haftar to attack the Tripoli government and has actively supported the Eastern elements of the Libyan polity.⁶ This policy is part of the UAE's wider counterrevolutionary stance, which it adopted in the aftermath of the events known as the Arab Spring. The UAE has coupled this stance with a policy of combatting governments and movements that it sees as being in unison with the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan). The UAE has constructed a narrative of anti-Islamism and combatting so-called "political Islam," even though the Libyan political scene is not dominated by Islamist political actors. This stance has brought Turkey and the UAE into conflict, as Turkey is often proactively engaged with pro-revolutionary elements in conflict areas such as Libya.

As a major player in a confusing position, France is also heavily vested in the Libyan quagmire, and prefers to provide direct support to Haftar while denying any involvement in the conflict. France perceives major security and economic interests in Libya. Moreover, Paris is motivated by its former imperial and colonial grandeur, as Sub Saharan Africa—of which Libya constitutes a significant portion—is a natural area of influence for France, given the region's strong historical linkages and linguistic ties. France is also keen to capitalize on Libyan energy resources through firms such as Total, which are invested heavily in Haftar-controlled regions. France seeks to assert a sense of authoritarian stability in Libya in which the stem of migration into Europe is curbed, economic interests are safeguarded and so-called "Islamist" elements are kept away from power. This desire for a crude sense of authority and stability has once again brought Turkey and France—two members of the NATO alliance—into conflict.

While France continues to play a significant strategic role in the Libyan geopolitical competition, Russia is trying to calibrate its military and economic engagements in the Libyan conflict. Russia's engagement with Libya has been multifaceted and diverse, yet the country has also opted to eschew direct engagement, as it often does in areas of the former Soviet Union and Syria. In the absence of U.S. strategic engagement, since 2019, Russia's approach has proven to be the smartest means of intervention. Using hybrid methods of asymmetric warfare in the region, and locating the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, as the main military tool in interfering with Libya, Russia has gained freedom of mobilization in both the political and military domains. Simultaneously, Russia sells a vast amount of arms and military equipment to Haftar's army. Russia's indirect intervention makes geopolitical calculations ambiguous, since the U.S. and France are worried about Russian military presence while having chosen to favor Haftar in the conflict. Russia, as in all major regional conflicts, sees Libya as an opportunity to harm the Western Alliance, in which major NATO members, Turkey, Italy and France are all vested. Thus, through Wagner, Moscow sees an opportunity to create a foothold against NATO in the critical Eastern Mediterranean region. Through Libya, Russia has the ability to influence migration patterns into Europe and energy supplies. In keeping with its policy of destabilizing the West, Moscow views Libya as an invaluable vantage point. In a future scenario where Russia's Wagner mercenaries gain official status in Libya, Moscow will have fulfilled a significant step in its goals and could force the Western powers to compromise.

To recalibrate its power status in North Africa and in light of its historical connection with Libya, Italy is also eager in its strategic engagements in the political process. Italy is aware of the French intentions in Libya and tries to play a mediating role with a special emphasis on relations with Tripoli. However, Italy doesn't hesi-

tant to contact Haftar during the conflict with a low-level delegation. The political process in the post-Berlin conference and the subsequent establishment of the GNU makes the Italian strategy more focused on economic opportunities and on competing with France and the UK.

Amid the intense strategic rivalry over Libya, only Turkey supported the internationally recognized legitimate GNA, upon their invitation and written request, and facilitated the political and security landscape to start a political process not only for the local actors but also for international players.⁷ Turkey's Libya strategy rests on two bases: foremost, it seeks to dispel a regional coalition of countries in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region that seeks to diminish the Turkish role, and secondly, it seeks to strengthen the Tripoli government by lending support to pro-democracy forces in the region. A major economic player in Libya, Turkey had invested over 16 billion USD into the country before Gaddafi's fall in 2011. Turkey would like to once again see the returns of these investments and capitalize on Libya's genuine economic potential. In the post-Berlin process, Turkey continued to support the GNU, by facilitating the consolidation of its political power and supporting the reorganization of military forces under the GNU. More importantly, Turkey sought to engage regional actors to maintain the political process, although some regional actors were problematizing Turkey's military presence in Libya. Therefore, Turkey is the major constructive player in Libya through its constant and active engagement with the Tripoli government and other local actors.

All in all, external dynamics, through various venues, have the ability to influence Libya's national-scale, internal dynamics, which involve various power holders and decision-makers. It should be noted that the influence of the external actors provokes a change of the internal dynamic itself, which in turn influences the political process in Libya.

Potential Risks and Challenges

One may talk of a possible risk chain in Libya that could potentially unsettle the political process. The scenario begins with severe election polarization due to the lack of political consensus and the absence of a structural political culture supporting compromise. This could in turn stoke local military escalation and armed conflict, as feuding sides in Libya are all backed by powerful external players involved in geopolitical competition over the regional strategic environment. This competition could compromise the security of the election process, as there is already grave uncertainty about the institutional capacity of the authorities in organizing safe, fair and free elections without hindrance.

This goes to show that elections are not an end in themselves. The mere possibility of elections at the end of the year does not equate to political stability in Libya.

Four main risks should be seriously considered for the future of stability—or instability—in Libya. The first risk involves the process of the election and the possibility of election polarization. The main strategic issue in the Libyan election context is the lack of a roadmap and the nonexistence of well-designed election regulations. This includes the absence of a body of well-defined election law that all local and national parties find equally acceptable. One way or another, all parties agree that the election should be held across the country. However, when practical and logistical issues are brought to the table to be discussed in detail, such as the actual voting procedures, the eligibility of candidates, the conditions for being a candidate for MPs, the status of the parliament and the physical location of the parliament, the number of MPs for electoral centers and other technical and constitutional issues, no common ground can be found. Therefore, the election process itself is an issue that might pave the way for another wave of conflict

escalation. Moreover, the election campaign which will take place across the country is likely to trigger a new wave of conflictual narratives among the local political actors. As mentioned above, the local actors have divergent interests and priorities and have been fighting for different strategic objectives. The different narratives of the political parties and the rivalries among political actors therefore may facilitate further political polarization within Libyan society and feed into the political landscape in a very negative way. The fragility of the political and security environment may find itself further exacerbated by the involvement of external actors in the election process, facilitating the emergence of a conflictual environment that will ultimately destabilize election security across the country.

Such a risk could mobilize the armed groups in most cities to reject the elected individuals, while Haftar might exploit the political turmoil to claim legitimacy and build supremacy with the support of his backers. This is especially likely if the candidates of the latter are not favored by popular vote in the Western part of the country, given that the bulk of the population lives in the Northwest coastal region. This scenario indicates that the political process may ignite military mobilization if any of the parties is not happy with the election outcomes.

Another risk is the eruption of military escalation that could bring another wave of armed conflict between two main power centers—namely the West and the East. Given the fragility of the ceasefire and the lack of political consensus among local military and political actors, election polarization and the lack of election security may provide an opportunity for military actors to interfere in the election process.

As part of the political and military polarization that may emerge out of the election rivalry, weakness in election security may create a new strategic environment for external actors, since they per-

ceive this process as a threat to their priorities in Libya. This may bring about another wave of geopolitical competition among the external actors, which will ultimately force them to invest more in the election process. Indeed, geopolitical rivalry over the election poses a serious challenge for the continuation of the Berlin process and the agreements reached at the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in Geneva. The possibility of a new wave of conflict over the election process may also damage the credibility of the international political peace process, which will lead local actors to return to their traditional backers.

Conclusion

The GNU's strategy is to make all internal and external actors happy and satisfied by means of the ongoing political process; however, fragility on the ground and ambiguity regarding the election process is a reminder of the difficulty of such a strategy. Armed groups on the ground should not be excluded from the strategic calculations, because they still hold armed power as the ultimate tool with which to change the situation on the ground. On the other hand, while many actors, including the internal ones, focus on the election, Libya has many other problems that have not even begun to be solved.⁸ Therefore, the election is not an end in itself. Libya's prospects remain diverse, with promising outcomes possible—alongside potentially grim ones.

The first potential scenario concerns the possibility of an easing of the conflict through strong regional cooperation and partnership that overlooks political differences in an effort to aid the Libyan people. Joint Turkish-Egyptian cooperation and coordination in order to steer Libya into some direction of stability could be a possible driver of such cooperation; however, this is highly de-

pendent on the development of bilateral ties between these two countries. Such endeavors could possibly be aided by Algeria, Tunisia and other neighboring countries, in order to provide a true regional framework. Such a scenario could be backed by major Western interlocutors as well, since their primary concern would be the easing of the conflict in order to contain any fallout, such as a refugee influx or an escalation in security concerns. The U.S. alongside the EU and possibly Russia could be expected to voice support for Turkish-Egyptian coordination on this matter.

A Turkey-Egypt *détente* with positive spillover effects onto the Libyan crisis could materialize in a series of ways. Foremost, it should be noted that both sides have much to gain from such an eventuality. Egypt could expand its footprint with the Tripoli government via Turkey and could possibly influence the political dialogue process. This could lead to the announcement of a common candidate that would satisfy both Egyptian and Turkish concerns in upcoming elections. Egypt could also make major capital gains if it cooperates with Turkey, as the Tripoli government could ramp up coordination with Egyptian investment authorities as both economies are naturally linked to one another. On the flip side, Turkey too would be served greatly by such a compromise. Egypt would cease to become a member of the anti-Turkish regional formation in the Eastern Mediterranean, and hence Turkey's security concerns would be slightly alleviated. Moreover, Turkey and Egypt could sign a maritime delimitation agreement similar to that between Ankara and Tripoli.

Alongside cooperation, the possibility of competition also remains, especially among Turkey, France, Egypt and the UAE. If geopolitical rivalries persist, Libya's election schedule might be altered, military conflicts might arise and mercenaries could potentially proliferate in the region. While Libya is currently focused on a political solution, most of these actors continue to have nearly

irreconcilable worldviews when it comes to Libya and the wider region. Moreover, they are motivated by maintaining power and projecting influence; hence, their positions are not expected to change, with compromise only possible when interests align. Thus, a flare-up of conflict could lead to destabilization, with the situation quickly escalating to create an adverse scenario.

The final prospect considers a stalemate followed by a return to a “business as usual” type of situation where the shifting political scene has no impact on the country. This would entail a prolonged stalemate of the conflict, with high militarization among both camps and the continued existence of vested interests of the foreign actors involved. This scenario would materialize in the event of a collapse of the political dialogue process. The repercussions would be grim, as it would turn Libya into a frozen conflict with little prospects for the return to normalcy.

In order to maintain a smooth election process and to consolidate the political process, it should be highlighted that the election itself cannot be considered the ultimate solution for all the internal and external problems facing the Libyan state. Therefore, the international community, including UNSMIL as the main facilitator of the process, should engage efficiently to support the local actors, guarantee election security, be ready to prevent military escalation and support democratic transition in Libya.

Endnotes

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NOTES

About SAM

Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (SAM) is a think-tank and a research center which is chartered by law and has been active since May 1995. SAM was established as a consultative body to provide Turkish Foreign Policy decision makers with scholarly and scientific assessments of relevant issues, and reviews Turkish foreign policy with a futuristic perspective.

SAM conducts research, organizes scholarly events relevant to the ever expanding spectrum of Turkish Foreign Policy in cooperation with both Turkish and foreign academicians, its counterparts from around the world as well as various universities and government agencies. SAM provides consultancy to the foreign ministry departments as well as some other state institutions in foreign policy issues while also establishing regional think-tank networks.

In addition to its role of generating up-to-date information, reliable data and insightful analysis as a think-tank, SAM functions as a forum for candid debate and discussion for anyone who is interested in both local and global foreign policy issues. Increasingly, SAM has become a center of attraction since it successfully brings scholars and policy makers together for exchange of ideas in panels, in-house meetings, seminars and training programs for young diplomats.

SAM has a widening range of publications. Along with its traditional publication, Perceptions, which is a quarterly English language journal that hosts distinguished Turkish and international scholars within its pages, SAM has initiated Vision Papers which expresses the views of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, and SAM Papers that covers the current debates of foreign policy by various scholars.

With its commitment to contribution to the body of knowledge and constructive debate particularly in Turkish Foreign Policy, SAM will continue to serve as an indispensable think-tank and research center given its role promoting interaction and mutual benefits among the MFA, NGOs, other think-tanks and the broader scientific community and hence strengthen the human and intellectual capital of Turkey.



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