

THIRD-PARTY MEDIATION IN PROTRACTED CONFLICTS INVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION: THE CASE OF LIBYA

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Abstract

This paper explores conflict resolution attempts in Libya since 2011, analysing the contribution of external third-party mediators and their efforts to solve the evolving, multilayered dispute and to foster a political transition. Competing actors, emergent challenges as well as peacebuilding achievements and failures are highlighted, allowing to propose steps that go beyond mere conflict management and support a sustainable political transformation. To appreciate the context of and the challenges for third-party mediation, in particular by the United Nations, the first section following the introduction sheds light on the current conflict setting and dynamics. The second part analyses how the evolving geopolitical setting affects the Libyan playing field. Section three discusses the implications of systemic challenges for the effectiveness of UN mediation, as well as the impact of parallel external efforts on the latter. Section four proceeds with an overview of mediation practice and achievements, eventually distilling recommendations for actors interested in supporting mediation processes in Libya.

Acronyms

AU – African Union

CBL – Central Bank of Libya

CSDP – Common Foreign and Security policy (of the European Union)

GNS – Government of National Stability (in Tobruk, formerly under PM Bashaga)

GNU – Government of National Unity (since 2021, based in Tripoli, PM Dbeibah)

HCS – High Council of State (Tripolitanian rump parliament since 2016; from the original GNC/ General National Congress)

HoR – House of Representatives (Tobruk based) (Ar. majlis an-nuwwab)

IFCL – International Follow-up Committee for Libya (part of the German-led Berlin process)

JMC – Joint Military Committee, also 5+5 Committee (representatives from the HoR, LAAF and GNU)

LAAF – Libyan Arab Armed Forces (also LNA = Libyan National Army)

LIA – Libyan Investment Authority

LPA – Libyan Political Agreement (also referred to as Skhirat Agreement)

LPDF – Libyan Political Dialogue Forum

LPRD – Libyan Programme for Reintegration and Development (until 2014: WAC – Warriors Affairs Commission)

NOC – National Oil Corporation

PC – Presidency Council (Ar. Al-majlis al-ri'asi al-libiy) – chairman Mohammed Menfi (the mandate englobes the supreme command of the armed forces)

SRSG – Special Representative of the UN Secretary General

SSA – Stabilisation Support Apparatus – ceased to exist as head Abdel-Ghani al-Kikli was killed in May 2025

UNSC – United Nations Security Council (also referred to as P5)

UNSMIL – United Nations Support Mission

6+6 committee – Joint Committee of the House of Representatives and the High Council of State

Introduction

Briefly after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi, the autocratic ruler of Libya, the United Nations already started to act as a mediator in what was an impending conflict of diverging interests.¹ For this purpose, UNSMIL (United Nations Support Mission in Libya) was given a mandate to mediate aiming “to assist and support Libyan national efforts to [...] undertake inclusive political dialogue, [and to] promote national reconciliation”² in the autumn of 2011. So far, ten special representatives within a span of 14 years tried to maintain the central role of the UN in this process and to create a basis for the peaceful resolution of diverging interests in and around Libya this way.³ In spite of local resistance and weak international support, the UN was able to stand its ground as the only official mediator.⁴ However, these multilateral efforts do not really lead to progress for three reasons. Firstly, the two competing elites in the west and the east of the country have no genuine interest in resolving the conflict by way of negotiations. On the one hand, they want to keep their comfortable positions in a benignly anarchic environment,⁵ on the other

hand, they would resort to a military option in case of doubt, which, however, is currently unavailable due to a ceasefire agreement. Secondly, some member states support the UN rhetorically whilst holding back in practice level and maintaining intensive relations with their local assets, which range from parallel platforms for dialogue to direct military support.⁶ Thirdly, the same actors also undermine UN mediation by arranging their own summits with high-ranking players of their liking to pursue their national geopolitical interests (as was the case during the 2025 tripartite summit between President Erdogan, PM Meloni and PM Dbeibah), and by violating the UN arms embargo to strengthen the military capabilities of Libyan parties to the dispute they are associated with.

In an international environment impacted by shifts in several fundamental parameters at the same time which is relatively anarchic for this reason, Libya quickly became a plaything of various external actors as from 2011.⁷ The entire peacebuilding architecture is also affected by this global dynamism,⁸ a situation clearly reflected in the limited capacity to act of the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, a number of resolutions regarding Libya were adopted and even a maritime component under European command was created to monitor the continuing arms embargo.⁹ However, the situation emerging in practice is paradoxical because even players which are permanent or non-permanent members

¹ Sean William Kane and Kenny Gluck, *Mediation after Revolution in Libya* (Genf: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Oslo Forum Network of Mediators, 2012).

² The UN SC Resolution 2009 of September 2011 established UNSMIL under the leadership of the UNSG Special Representative.

³ Youssef Mohammed Sawani, *Libya: An Assessment of Twelve Years of International Mediation* (International Center for Dialogue Initiatives, 2023).

⁴ Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, „Multiparty Mediation in a Changing World: The Emergence and Impact of Parallel Processes to UN Peacemaking in Syria and Libya,” *International Journal of Conflict Management* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCM-A01-2023-0004>; Vanessa Vujić, *Third Party Mediation: Comparative Case Study on the Effectiveness of Foreign Intervention in Intra-State Armed Conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Libya, and Myanmar* (New York: City University of New York, 2023).

⁵ Tim Eaton, „Consolidation of Elite Network Control over Libyan State Institutions,” in *Coercion, Predation and State Formation in Libya and Iraq: Parallel Perspectives*, Peace and Security Study (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, März 2025).

⁶ Buğra Süster, *Turkish Foreign Policy in Libya: Geopolitical Interests and Fragile Peace*, SANA Briefing Paper (Genf: Small Arms Survey, November 2024).

⁷ Already in his 2014 study, Peter Bartu was highlighting “competing mediation efforts” to those of the UN.

⁸ Oliver P. Richmond, „The Evolution of the International Peace Architecture,” *European Journal of International Security* 6, Nr. 4 (2021): 379–400, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.12>.

⁹ The European Union’s CSDP mission EUNAVFOR Med Irini was launched in March 2020.

of the Security Council and have contributed to wording countless resolutions respect neither the letter nor the spirit of these resolutions. Thus, they not only contribute to the erosion of international law but also undermine the credibility of multilateralism and the reputation der UN.

In addition, this constellation reduces the capacity to act of the UN in what is still the only official mediation process while at the same time also undermining it through parallel processes and actors diverging from UN policy.¹⁰ Intra-European disagreement, which can in particular be identified in the hardly reconcilable positions of France and Italy, opens up leeway for external spoilers and leads to entrenched internal faultlines.

The first section of this analysis discusses the current dynamic conflict in Libya to explore the multi-facetted problematic situation which the UN is faced with, involving local conditions as much as global geopolitical interests. The second section sheds light on geopolitical shifts on the international stage, looking at their repercussions for the constellation of political and military actors in Libya in greater detail. The third section comprises an analysis of the consequences which this mix of interests has on UN-driven mediation processes, identifying both supporting and interfering players. The fourth section describes practices of external mediation in Libya. The concluding section will provide recommended actions to support mediation processes with a focus on measures to support the UN process.

¹⁰ Tarek Megerisi, *The Bear Who Came for Tea: Russia, Libya and the Kremlin's Playbook for Fragile States*, Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025); Irene Costantini and Ruth Hanau Santini, „Power Mediators and the 'Illiberal Peace' Momentum: Ending Wars in Libya and Syria,” *Third World Quarterly* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1995711>.

Libya's theatre: A paradigmatic contemporary protracted low-intensity conflict

Way into the second decade after the demise of Qadhafi's Jamahiriyya – his idiosyncratic “Republic of popular masses”, the North African country endowed with the hugest hydrocarbon reserves on the African continent remains in a process between statebuilding, nationbuilding and seeking internal peace. Frozen in an uneasy ceasefire for close to five years, Libya stays put on the path of re-inventing a political system capable of uniting into a sovereign country and of creating the societal peace necessary to realise its full potential for prosperity. Fundamentally, the conflict occurs on two distinct, though interwoven levels. Domestically, the dispute is over a new social contract¹¹ where political leadership, popular participation, and economic redistribution require renegotiation, and at least some sort of majoritarian consensus. The second conflict layer is international in nature, marked by massive geostrategic interference from external actors, often by means of clientelist relations with Libyan players, including non- or para-state armed factions.

Lost in transition: Stalled state formation and recurrent armed conflict

With competing actors engulfed into substantial disagreements over the electoral law and a constitution, attempts to move forward on the political agenda increasingly resemble a catch-22 situation. This means

¹¹ Wolfgang Mühlberger, *Iraq's Quest for a Social Contract: An Approach to Promoting Social Cohesion and State Resilience*, IDOS Discussion Paper 1/2023 (Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability, 2023).

that elections cannot be held without a legal foundation, and, vice-versa, competing political bodies in disagreement over the electoral law render any exit from interim solutions delusional. Meanwhile, previously elected or nominated bodies, either executive or legislative, operate without popular mandate, reinforcing a festering legitimacy crisis.¹² Furthermore, the geographic divide between the nascent Libyan polities has been cemented during the ten past years, which led to institutional splits, for instance between two rival central banks, presenting a fruitful terrain for external interference.¹³

In this relatively anarchic political and economic setting, former revolutionary militias managed to uphold their powerful roles as armed non-state combatants by merging with organised crime, strengthening corruption at all levels, and preparing the ground for the infiltration of institutions. This development not only blocks reforms and hampers the political process,¹⁴ it sustains tendencies towards the ‘shrinking civil society-space’, and leads to repeated bouts of infighting, as recently as in May 2025 in Tripoli.¹⁵ Lacking a centrally controlled police force, the capital itself has in fact become fertile ground for turf wars: “Since the establishment of the GNU [Government of National Unity] in 2021, the trajectory of

armed group dynamics in Tripoli points not to rupture, but to the emergence of a more concentrated yet fiercely contested armed order shaped by fluid alliances and intra-elite competition” (idem).

At the same time, a range of external, regional and international actors has been thriving on the state’s lack of unitary sovereignty, pushing forward their own geopolitical agendas by establishing patron-client relationships with Libyan parties to the conflict. This additional international dimension of the protracted dispute has rendered third-party conflict resolution much more demanding – or even virtually impossible as some of the very actors pretending to support the United Nations practically undermine its efforts at conflict resolution and state building.¹⁶ For instance, Russia is a staunch supporter of Haftar’s LAAF/LNA (Libyan Arab Armed Forces/ Libyan National Army) in Eastern Libya while its sole official diplomatic representation is situated in the Western capital Tripoli, where the internationally recognised GNU enjoys staunch Turkish support.

Nevertheless, the United Nations has been able to sustain an overall mediation momentum by repeatedly reinstating a negotiation process, based on a series of P5 resolutions and a permanent mission, UNSMIL, based in Tripoli. Amongst other things, this resulted in the 2015 Skhirat agreement, the October 2020 ceasefire, or the LPDF (Libyan Political Dialogue Forum) which led to the latest iteration of government formation, the GNU (Government of National Unity). Leveraging these previous milestones

¹² Cynthia Happi, *Resolving Libya’s Legitimacy Crisis: 2023 Elections as a Pathway to Peace and Democratisation*, Joint Brief Nr. 26 (Europäische Kommission, April 2023).

¹³ For instance, Russia has successfully leveraged this divide, offering its services for the provision of bank notes. See: Al-Arabiya, *Illicit banknotes in east Libya, some made by Russia, hit dinar*, 24 July 2024 <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2024/07/24/illicit-banknotes-in-east-libya-some-made-by-russia-hit-dinar>.

¹⁴ Matt Herbert et al., *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya*, Security Council Illicit Economies Watch Series (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

¹⁵ ACLED, *Political Competition and Infighting among Tripoli’s Armed Groups Reach beyond Libya’s Capital*, Report (Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset, 10. Juli 2025).

¹⁶ Muriel Asseburg et al., Hrsg., *Mission Impossible? UN Mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen*, SWP Research Paper 8 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Oktober 2018).

of its predecessors,¹⁷ the new Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) Hanna Tetteh presented of a new roadmap for a non-violent settlement of the Libyan conflict end August 2025, primarily with the aim of refreshing the political track and preparing the road to hold elections.¹⁸

Simultaneously, external stakeholders such as Turkey, France or Russia, have also been active diplomatically in 2025. Yet these steps by individual member states with a stark interest in Libya do not necessarily strengthen the activities of the UN. In early August this year, Turkish President Erdogan met with the Italian PM and her Libyan counterpart, Prime Minister Dbeibah. The declared purpose of this 'Istanbul-Summit' was to discuss migration, energy in exploration in the Mediterranean, as well as Libya's political future.¹⁹ On the other hand, the main contender of PM Dbeibah, Field Marshal Haftar, visited both Paris and Moscow during this same year; while the Élysée remained rather mute on either purpose or outcome of the February visit, the aim of the May visit in Russia was divulged as discussing the deepening of defence ties.²⁰

Despite substantial external interference in Libyan politics since 2011, there are also powerful forces working towards a unified Libyan state: above all, the United Nations – as well as those actors, local and non-Libyan,

who benefit from the status quo of benign anarchy, institutional split and geographic division, having no interest whatsoever in the success of a political negotiation process to untangle the complex conflict structure. The recent failures to hold presidential elections in December 2021 or parliamentary elections in 2023, is a clear indication of this setting, marked by a perennial political stalemate. Therefore, ultimately, the future of Libya will depend on which of these two antagonistic sides enjoys greater staying power.



PM Dbeibah during his visit to the European Commission (15 May 2024)
(c) European Union, 2024

This discussion paper analyses the political, security-related and economic contexts of and opportunities for external third-party mediation at the national level in Libya. The research is based on qualitative research methods, both literature review and interviews. The author conducted the analysis based on his own previous research and related publications on Libya, his work on social contracts, statehood and governance in MENA, as well as his engagement as a practitioner in designing dialogue projects to support conflict resolution around strategic resources, such as water, in Western Libya.

¹⁷ The Skhirat Agreement or Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) was reached under SRSG Bernardino León, the LPDF under acting SRSG Williams. See: Cherkaoui, 2023, and Altermann, 2021.

18 Abdulkader Assad, Tetteh: Upcoming roadmap to be based on Libyans' views to end transitional phases, 2 August 2025, Libya Observer: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/tetteh-upcoming-roadmap-be-based-libyans-views-end-transitional-phases>.

¹⁹ Daily Sabah, Erdoğan, Meloni, Dbeibah hold trilateral summit in Istanbul, 1 August 2025 <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-meloni-dbeibah-hold-trilateral-summit-in-istanbul>

²⁰ Meğerisi, *The bear who came for tea*.

A geostrategic and ideological playing field: Competing forces and dividing lines across Libya

Since 2011, regional and international actors have intervened in Libya not only politically but above all militarily, defending their interests by various means. This interference occurred for geostrategic reasons – such as Russia’s goal of establishing a conveniently located hub in North-Africa, but also for economic motives – driven by the attempt to build on major business and defence contracts from the period before the fall of the old regime. These partially overlapping but also conflicting tendencies became apparent early on at the international level, discernible in voting patterns in the UN Security Council.²¹ The third motive for external intervention and partisanship on behalf of local actors are ideological preferences. In the course of the conflicts and transformations of the Arab Spring, the divide between supporters of Islamist governance (Qatar, Turkey) and those who welcome a non-religiously defined authoritarian status quo in the region (Egypt, UAE) has deepened. Since 2011, this resulted in countless entry points for regional and international actors, leading to the development of mutual dependencies between Libyan conflict parties and their external supporters. For external third-party peace mediation, this increasingly complex and polarised landscape turned out to be a major challenge to navigate, as discussed in detail in the next section.

Shaping the conflict: Decisive external military engagement

Turkey’s military support and engagement for the internationally recognised GNA government in Tripoli during the fighting in 2019/2020 is emblematic of recent geopolitical shifts – and the means chosen to achieve corresponding goals. Even though the Ikhwanji (Muslim Brotherhood) element has been a strong driver in Turkey, ostensibly non-Islamist actors such as Field Marshal Haftar’s LAAF/LNA are also co-operating with fundamentalist forces. Their ranks include Madkhali Salafi units under the command of his sons, which suggests a thoroughly pragmatic attitude – although external influence cannot be ruled out entirely.²²

During the first civil war-like escalation in 2014-2015, it became clear that Russia was heavily involved and aimed to exploit the situation so as to establish permanent military presence. What is now referred to as the ‘Africa Corps’ were irregular Russian units taking on combat roles in Libya under the name “Wagner”²³ since 2014. This emerging actor created a complicated situation for the two European NATO states, France and Italy, which have shown the most pronounced interest in developments in Libya. Despite the geopolitical shifts since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, France remained true to its position and continues to support Field Marshal Haftar, allied with Russia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Whereas Italy sided with Islamist forces in and around Tripoli and the surrounding area for equally pragmatic motives linked to migration control – and felt

²¹ Peter Bartu, *Libya’s Political Transition: The Challenges of Mediation* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2014); Clara Portela and Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux, UN Security Council Sanctions and Mediation in Libya: Synergy or Obstruction?, *Global Governance* 28 (2022): 228–250.

²² ICG (2019) Addressing the Rise of Libya’s Madkhali-Salafis, 25 April, International Crisis Group <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/addressing-rise-libyas-madkhali-salafis>.

²³ Megerisi, *The bear who came for tea*.

rather threatened by the Russian presence.²⁴

As early as during the period of military support for the rebels against Gaddafi in 2011, the US held back militarily. President Obama issued the motto 'leading from behind', thus effectively giving Europeans the lead. For the US under President Trump, just as under his predecessors, Libya is not a geostrategic priority – even though it was decided in 2019 under the 'Global Fragility Act' to include Libya among the top 10 countries for stabilisation and violence prevention.²⁵ In fact, the US had focused heavily on anti-IS operations, which is why, with the weakening of the organisation since 2018, interest in Libya has been waning temporarily. Nevertheless, in April 2022 a ten-year plan for Libya called 'U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability' (SPCPS) was launched to foster long-term stability.

Despite the ongoing disagreement between France and Italy, the fraught relationship under the Trump II administration is yet another reason to ponder Europe's role in Libya, from an EU perspective as well, including the question of its 'strategic autonomy'.²⁶ Regardless of the debate about the actual – or desired – extent of European involvement,²⁷ the EU put in place the maritime mission EUNAVFOR

MED Irini (replacing mission Sophia)²⁸ to enforce a comprehensive UN arms embargo. Although the effectiveness of the mission has been criticised, and considered "totally ineffective" by some,²⁹ Libyan media recently reported the seizure of a vessel packed with military vehicles en route for Libyan shores, by a Dutch frigate under the Irini mission.³⁰ However, in practice, the UN arms embargo, unlike the economic sanctions, has proven to be particularly weak from the outset.³¹

Ideological affiliations in the wake of the Arab upheavals

The faultlines surfacing during the Arab Spring across the region are an expression not only of competing, but actually of hostile ideological orientations. These also manifested themselves among Libyan political groups. In addition, they led to corresponding organic connections with external actors, where Turkey and Qatar nurture close ties with Libyan Islamist factions, whereas an anti-Islamist cluster developed around the LAAF/LNA, comprising above all Egypt, France, and the UAE. Though Russia is also entangled with the latter, its position is neither driven by anti-Islamist sentiment to justify regime continuity (like Egypt and UAE), nor by the choice to uphold French-style *laïcité*. Its motives are purely geostrategic, leveraging opportunities to undermine European interests concerning the control of irregular migration flows and,

²⁴ Nona Mikhelidse, *Italy Sidelined as Russia Consolidates Position in Libya*, IAI Commentaries 19 | 40 (Rom: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 25. Juni 2019).

²⁵ See: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2116>

²⁶ Silvia Colombo and Dario Cristiani, *Libya as a Transatlantic Litmus Test for European Strategic Autonomy*, IAI Commentaries 21/26 (Rom: Istituto Affari Internazionali, April 2021), The authors argue, in view of limited strategic US interest in Libya, that Europe could leverage the Libyan conflict to show its capacity and resolve for conflict resolution in its own strategic neighbourhood.

²⁷ Jesutimilehin O. Akamo and Aude Thomas, *The EU as (In) Significant Player in Libya*, JOINT Brief Nr. 23 (Rom: Istituto Affari Internazionali, November 2023).

²⁸ See: <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>.

²⁹ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, Summary (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Januar 2022), 18.; with reference to the UN Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts; with reference to the UN Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts.

³⁰ Libya Observer, Ship loaded with 350 armored vehicles headed for Haftar departs to Misrata after being held in Greece, 6 August 2025 <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/ship-loaded-350-armored-vehicles-headed-haftar-departs-misrata-after-being-held-greece>.

³¹ Portela and Romanet Perroux, *UN Security Council Sanctions and Mediation in Libya*.

further afield, its positioning in the Sahel.³² Italy's position is noteworthy: under various governments (up to Meloni), the country has decided to support Islamist-dominated forces in and around Tripoli for purely pragmatic reasons related to migration management, driven by geographical proximity to departure points. And while Turkey's role is also driven by a wider geopolitical 'neo-Ottoman' agenda in the Mediterranean,³³ the Gulf emirate Qatar has been playing a relatively stealthy role, through supporting the Jihadist-Islamist Revolutionaries' Council in Benghazi against Haftar's forces and clearly aligning with the Tripoli government, potentially seeking to emerge at some point with a new mediation role, as it already did during the de-escalation efforts of 2022 between Haftar and Prime Minister Dbeibah.³⁴

Rentier-based predation: Undermining service provision and conflict resolution

In a 2018 interview, former SRSG Ghassan Salamé underscored the importance of the dispute over the redistribution of oil revenues as a domestic conflict driver of major relevance, also in comparison to ideological considerations of the stakeholders.³⁵ Even though reality might be closer to a mix of both, his reference to a 'rentier state mentality' equally serves to explain the expectations of a 'rentier society' towards its state, as well as the high risk of predation and corruption associated with an economy marked by quasi-monolithic dependence

on a single resource for state income.³⁶ On the other hand, a constructivist approach to reading the conflict and its underlying causes came to the conclusion that ideational factors equally play an essential role, with high significance for the development of patron-client relationships.³⁷

As regards the issue of preferential access to hydrocarbon resources, it is likely not as important for external actors as it has sometimes been assumed. The quantities extracted still remain below pre-conflict levels, and most of the refined products even need to be imported, fuelling a lucrative oil-smuggling business which several armed players are involved in.³⁸ Instead, internal Libyan control over resources by armed actors has mainly been used as a means of exerting pressure to obtain extract concessions. This was already evident early on into the conflict, as indicated by the stance taken by the Petrol Facilities Guards (PFG). They are seen far less as guarantors of oil deliveries than as a potentially disruptive link in the supply chain.³⁹ Altogether, income from hydrocarbon resources currently serves to perpetuate the conflict – rather than attracting external actors to get involved in order to control the resources. Moreover, rogue militias now generate income from human trafficking or trafficking in illegal goods (such as drugs) – unlike the two dysfunctional rump governments who remain entirely dependent on oil rent income.

³² Megerisi, *The bear who came for tea*.

³³ Süssler, *Turkish Foreign Policy in Libya*.

³⁴ Sansom Milton et al., „Qatar's Evolving Role in Conflict Mediation," *Mediterranean Politics* 30, Nr. 1 (Oktober 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2266665>.

³⁵ Humanitarian Dialogue, *Exiting Chaos: Ghassan Salamé Reflects on Peacemaking*, Oslo Forum Interview (Genf: The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2018).

³⁶ Jason Pack argues for an "economy-focused approach to peacebuilding" in his 2019 publication, "It's Economy, Stupid: How Libya's Civil War Is Rooted in Its Economic Structures", <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/c03/its-economy-stupid-how-libyas-civil-war-rooted-its-economic-structures>.

³⁷ Yasser Harrak Srfi, „Conflict Resolution in Libya," *OSJ/ Open Science Journal* 8, Nr. 2 (2023).

³⁸ Herbert et al., *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya*.

³⁹ Matt Herbert and Emadeddin Badi, *Blessing and Curse: Petroleum Profits, Control and Fragility in Libya*, Peace and Security Study (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2022).

Beyond the question of hydrocarbon extraction, the economy at large does play a role for external players, who systematically abuse the institutional split to foster relations with their respective clients. Last year, Russia sent freshly printed dinars to the Central Bank branch in Benghazi.⁴⁰ Even though it is not unusual for countries in the Global South to import currency printed abroad, the extent of such interference can have severe macro-economic implications, above all inflationary pressure. In this instance, the Russian move is primarily motivated by nurturing ties with their local asset, Field Marshal Haftar, and to uphold the split between the Central Bank branches.⁴¹

In the domain of economic sanctions, the UN upheld the blocking of funds from the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA).⁴² Due to internal disagreements – related to intermittent warfare and the lack of a central government in Libya, the UN SC has not found common ground to agree on a defreezing to date. In fact, the disagreements between both permanent and non-permanent Security Council members, “expose underlying power dynamics within the UNSC”,⁴³ and are driven by their affiliation with conflict parties.

Yet, shortly after Qadhafi’s fall, the P5 delisted the CBL (Central Bank of Libya) and the NOC (National Oil Corporation), allowing for regular transactions of these two core bodies needed for macro-economic stability. Until today, efforts persist from the Libyan

side to gain full access to the LIA assets which are valued at USD 68 billion,⁴⁴ while the very struggle has also seen cases of high-level corruption.⁴⁵

This raises the fundamental, and not merely theoretical, question of whether the political concept of representative democracy based on tax-paying citizens can be implemented at all in a state with a full-fledged rentier economy and related expectations on the part of the population with regard to the redistribution of wealth. The negotiation process corresponding to that concept – as per the UN SRSG mandate – has been in a trial stage for almost 15 years. The strong centralisation of the remaining rump state from Gaddafi’s era presents an additional complication. The local administration has no means of collecting taxes and is therefore entirely dependent on the central government for redistribution. Understandably, such a setting promotes centrifugal tendencies, as is clearly indicated by armed actors searching for alternative sources of income, which are usually illegal.

With two core conflicts, a local one about the emergence of a new social contract, and a geopolitical one marked by massive external interference, the odds seem to be against third-party mediation. Spoilers of even the best prepared roadmap tend to disrupt progress and sanctions threats only seem to nudge actors towards compliance under specific circumstances. On the other hand, as multidimensional as the conflict might be, entry-points for positive change can be identified and need to be leveraged by external-third party mediators. Furthermore, any mediation effort also needs to devise a

⁴⁰ See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/atlantic-council-billions-russia-printed-dinars-have-flooded-libyan-market> (2024).

⁴¹ Jonathan M. Winer, *Brokering a Solution to the Libyan Central Bank Crisis*, Analysis (The Middle East Institute, 30. August 2024).

⁴² International Crisis Group, *Frozen Billions: Reforming Sanctions on the Libyan Investment Authority*, Middle East and North Africa Report Nr. 249 (Brüssel: ICG, 2025).

⁴³ Portela and Romanet Perroux, *UN Security Council Sanctions and Mediation in Libya?*, 229.

⁴⁴ Sami Zaptia, LIA assets valued at US\$ 68 billion, *Libya Herald*, August 2025.

⁴⁵ Jonathan M. Winer, *Illegal Arrest and Detention of Libyan Asset Recovery Head Reflects Worsening Libyan Corruption*, Analysis (The Middle East Institute, 24. März 2025).

strategy that disentangles the links between external and local actors, especially if they undermine the overarching goal of fostering a unitary and sovereign state.

The next section analyses the consequences which the state collapse described here has for the attempts of external mediators to support the Libyan parties in their search for a political solution and on the path to state formation.

Being a pawn in the game: Implications of a complex and evolving conflict for third-party and UN mediation

With the given geopolitical tendencies, the emerging multipolar world is mirrored in the number of external actors and the levels of their involvement in Libya's conflict ecosystem.⁴⁶ Their interference reinforces frictions between external contenders for influence, while, along the same lines, it divides local stakeholders and thereby systematically undermines third-party mediation efforts⁴⁷ – or seeks to shape its outcomes. From a systemic point of view, the Libyan conflict is deeply penetrated by external forces which have successfully worked through specific entry points to transport their own interests, usually by nurturing patron-client relationships. At the same time, after almost 15 years of unresolved political and security-related questions, a range of local and external actors have deeply entrenched themselves in a status quo that provides them with sufficient benefits to fend

off any alternative.

Most recently, addressing the African Union PSC (Peace and Security Council), the new UN SRSG Hanna Tetteh issued a stern warning to Libyans to engage in the planned next roadmap, heading for early elections. The main goal of this “Libyan-led and Libyan-owned process”, under UN facilitation, is to leave the interim period institutions behind.⁴⁸ However, while replacing an executive with no legal mandate has its merits, elections alone are no panacea. A number of salient issues need to be solved first, or at least in parallel, to provide a solid basis for a future national dialogue.



Hanna Serwaa Tetteh, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

(c) UN Photo/Loeys Felipe

⁴⁶ Jalel Harchaoui and Bernardo Mariani, *Fragmentation of Peacemaking in Libya: Reality and Perception*, Global Transition Series (Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2022).

⁴⁷ Costantini and Santini, *Power mediators and the 'illiberal peace' momentum*.

⁴⁸ See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/tetteh-warns-consequences-if-libyan-leaders-fail-address-root-causes-conflict>.

Domestic political and security challenges

As no executive, neither in Tripoli nor in the country's East, is legitimate due to the expiration or contestation of their mandates, elections are urgently needed. However, the lack of a legal basis for elections has already repeatedly been put forward by those actors who prefer to keep the semi-chaotic status quo. Therefore, the first task of any newly elected, or unified interim government will be to prepare the legal foundations for future polls. These legal foundations extend to the question of the constitution, the reason why elections could also be held for a constitutional assembly.

In fact, the need for a comprehensive roadmap has been realised by several previous SRSGs, but National Dialogue conferences were pre-empted by violence on at least two occasions. This indicates that spoilers who resort to military force for political ends can easily disrupt UN-led processes. As the SRSG Tetteh has presented her new roadmap, every Libyan and external stakeholder will need to play by the book. Yet, as the success of the previous SRSGs Kobler, Léon and Williams has shown, perseverance is a good recipe for pushing a conflict resolution process forward beyond mere rhetoric.

On the security side, the need for Security Sector Reform (SSR) is as obvious as are the requirements of the political track. However, entrenched actors, with fresh links to illicit economies, perpetuate the role of militias way beyond their original task.⁴⁹ Hence, it becomes even more challenging to engage into DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration) as long as the

lack of a central state undermines its scope of action. Currently, the internationally recognised government in Tripoli attempts to enforce its hypothetical monopoly. According to a recent announcement by PM Dbeibah, the GNU seeks to strengthen the armed forces by a new strategy.⁵⁰ One of the difficulties of dismantling these militias is caused by the fact that over time, they have been able to accrue political capital, amongst other things by even playing a role in mediating local ceasefires.⁵¹

The militarisation of politics and politicisation of militias

Even though many of the militias in the west of the country are actually on the payroll of the MoD or the MoI,⁵² external backers can offer diplomatic support in addition to superior military support (equipment, training, and personnel). These two forms of backing are particularly valuable for the military structures under Haftar's control, as he is still considered a rogue general by the 'international community' and would have to either dissolve his structures or subordinate them entirely to the Tripoli government. In addition to the already firmly established geographical division, the situation within the two more or less loose and opportunistic military alliances is developing in such a way that many militias gained a further foothold through criminal activities. On the one hand, this weakens their already flexible loyalty

⁴⁹ Al-Shadeedi et al., *One Thousand and One Failings: Security Sector Stabilisation and Development in Libya*, CRU Report 2020 (Clingendael Institute, 2020).

⁵⁰ In his words: "Experience has proven that state stability can only be built on a single unified army operating under the banner of the law—an army with the doctrine of protecting the homeland and its citizens. Building such a professional army under the sole authority of the state is not an option; it is a national duty we pursue without hesitation." The Libya Observer, 12 August 2025, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/dbeibah-says-his-government-working-3-parallel-tracks-support-army-end-militias>.

⁵¹ ACLED, *Political competition and infighting among Tripoli's armed groups*, 5.

⁵² Interview with security expert.

while on the other hand, it also undermines clear command and control structures.

Furthermore, some of the UN members only pay lip-service to peaceful resolution efforts by the UN while pro-actively supporting elements that have repeatedly derailed planned national reconciliation.⁵³ In fact, some actors prefer military means to shape the situation on the ground in favour of their interests and clients instead of engaging in a negotiated process. As they hold massive spoiler potential, they can impair political processes they consider countering their entrenched interests.⁵⁴

In particular, Russia has been implanting its military presence, now under the so called 'Africa Corps'. Its activities are led by Yunus-bek Yevkurov, a military veteran with first-hand experience from Chechnya and other theatres of operation, and currently deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation.⁵⁵ For Russia, Libya has developed into a strategic asset, allowing it to project power directly into the Sahel zone.⁵⁶ With the recent defeat of its Syrian ally Assad, Russia relocated military hardware from the Middle East to Libya,⁵⁷ entrenching its local presence, and increasingly moving to showing its flag more often, compared to its earlier grey-zone

approach based on Wagner assets.⁵⁸

Geopolitical competition and peacebuilding: mission impossible?

Complicated by a fraught security and political landscape resulting from foreign interference, external third-party mediation attempts to face a number of challenges as multiple diplomatic tracks do not always align, and the 'great game' in Libya is driven by diverging national interests that are difficult to reconcile. In addition to the SRSG, individual national special envoys tend to 'spoil the broth' as they often work counter to the purpose of UN efforts.⁵⁹ For instance, the French President's special envoy, Paul Soler, has been playing a role which amounts to open geopolitical competition with Italy.⁶⁰ In addition, parallel negotiation processes tend to undermine UN efforts by reinforcing divides. However, as the Libyan theatre of operations differs greatly from Syria, Russia has not been able to launch an Astana-style format to date,⁶¹ most likely preferring the status quo to advance its geostrategic interests in North Africa and the Sahel. Moscow and Ankara already teamed up in early 2020 by embracing the role of mediators and calling for a ceasefire during the third wave of civil war then unfolding – and only in thinly veiled competition with the German efforts at the time.⁶² Earlier on, in 2017, Haftar had been rendered "socially acceptable" as he was introduced as an official player by Paris, on a par with then PM of the Tripolitanian GNA,

⁵³ Asseburg, *Mission Impossible?*.

⁵⁴ Emadeddin Badi, „The Blurred Lines of Power: Militias, Politics, and the Libyan State,“ in *Coercion, Predation and State Formation in Libya and Iraq*, hrsg. von Wolfram Lacher und Salam Said (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung / Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2025).

⁵⁵ See: <https://en.minbarlibya.org/2025/06/08/libya-an-mine-under-the-african-corps-project/>.

⁵⁶ Idem: "The supply and rotation of the «African Corps» in West Africa (primarily Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali) cannot logistically occur without relying on facilities in Haftar's domain."

⁵⁷ Frederic Wehrey, *Assad's Downfall Echoes Across the Mediterranean*, Diwan Commentary (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12. Dezember 2024).

⁵⁸ Anton Mardasov, *Rebalancing Russia's Mediterranean Strategy: From Showing the Flag to Retreating to the Gray Zone*, Analysis (The Middle East Institute, 24. Februar 2025).

⁵⁹ Sawani, *Libya*.

⁶⁰ Colombo and Cristiani, *Libya as a Transatlantic Litmus Test*.

⁶¹ Wolfgang Mühlberger, *Astana's Syria Conference: Musical Chairs on Moscow's Terms*, FIIA Comment 2/2017 (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2017).

⁶² Kirill Zharov, *Can Russia and Turkey Bring Peace to Libya?* Commentary. Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

Fayez Serraj. Italy launched the Palermo conference the following year, equally providing a stage to Haftar, thereby improving his international standing and eventually undermining its own Italian interests.⁶³

This competition between diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict is perceived differently by Libyan actors, depending on their political leanings.⁶⁴ However, external actors not only seek to undermine UN efforts.⁶⁵ For instance, European actors can also act entirely in line with UN-led conflict resolution efforts, as the two Berlin conferences in 2020 and 2021, as well as the latest attempt by the SRSG to relaunch the Berlin process have indicated.⁶⁶

From a peacebuilding angle, and beyond the immediate question of the intricacies of a setting, several elements are key to understanding how third-party mediation might be affected. First, on the level of perceptions, the impartiality associated with mediators, or organisations such as the UN, is a crucial element for its success.⁶⁷ In the view of the author, the legacy of Qadhafi's anti-imperialism plays out in two ways. On the one hand, a sort of consensus exists among the Libyan polity that eyes external intervention with principled suspicion.⁶⁸ On the other hand, Qadhafi's renegade role in

international politics is still remembered negatively by several interested players. Therefore, powerful external actors continue to attempt to shape Libya according to their interests and preferences. However, since no unified position has been reached thus far – even though it is formally represented by the UN – the current state of more or less controlled anarchy has become the preferred one for some actors who wish to maintain it at all cost.⁶⁹

Both developments render it essential for external third-party mediation by the UN to remain beyond any doubt of partiality. Therefore, it was the right approach to nurture a process with strong Libyan participation, as was initiated by SRSG Ghassan Salamé, a method also strongly supported by the current Special Representative Tetteh.

Second, inclusivity is another key element in mediation. Ideally a workable combination of top-down and bottom-up elements, some authors have been arguing in favour of 'reviving alternative conflict resolution approaches',⁷⁰ referring in fact to local-level peacebuilding. The question about the best way to approach the mediation process surfaced repeatedly in the reflection about conflict resolution in Libya.⁷¹ Recently, the UNDP presented local level peacebuilding as part of its resilience strategy in Libya.⁷²

⁶³ Mikhelidze, *Italy Sidelined as Russia Consolidates Position in Libya*.

⁶⁴ Harchaoui and Mariani, *Fragmentation of Peacemaking in Libya*, 2.

⁶⁵ Hellmüller and Salaymeh, *Multiparty mediation in a changing world*.

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.aktualisiertenachrichten.de/berlin-prozess-erhalt-neuen-schub-mit-un-gipfel>.

⁶⁷ Vujić, *Third Party Mediation*.

⁶⁸ The 2019 UNDP baseline survey published the findings of a country-wide survey concerning national reconciliation. One of its key findings was the lack of trust of Libyans towards both, external actors and national political elites. It also found that "foreign-led brokering raises Libyans' suspicions and often fails to engage representative and influential interlocutors" *National Reconciliation in Libya: A Baseline Survey*, Final Report (New York: UNDP, 14 May 2019), 68.

⁶⁹ Badi, *The blurred lines of power*.

⁷⁰ Pablo Pastor Vidal, *Reviving Alternative Conflict Resolution Approaches in Proxy Wars: The Case of Libya*, Euromesco Policy Brief Nr. 139 (Barcelona: IEMed, 2023).

⁷¹ José S. Vericat and Mosadek Hobrara, *From the Ground Up: UN Support to Local Mediation in Libya* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2018); Virginie Collombier, „Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya's Local Conflicts." In *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, hrsg. von Luigi Narbone et al. Florenz: European University Institute / MED, 2016.

⁷² United Nations Development Programme, *Local Peacebuilding and Resilience Strategy for Libya: From Stabilization to Peacebuilding and Resilience* (New York: UNDP, 2023).

In addition, a third element is also key to success in mediation. The genuine readiness of stakeholders for peace negotiation, commonly referred to as ripeness, is essential when considering the adequate timing and sequencing of peacebuilding activities, including external third-party roles. As long as major actors calculate that military means will bring them closer to their goals than a negotiated solution, external actors might find it hard to implement agreements, even if these have been eventually carved out at the negotiation table.

Marked by a sustained political deadlock, the lack of a state monopoly of violence, and de facto partition, Libya's institutions remain transitional and the risk of military escalation is constantly latent. The result, to date, is a shaky power-sharing arrangement, primarily based on repeated armed escalation, rather than on a negotiated settlement reached via consensus. Therefore, the next section rounds off the discussion on conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts by external actors as it analyses the approaches and outcomes, preparing the ground for the final section with related recommendations.

Mediation practice in Libya: External engagement against all odds

The role of the United Nations (SC/P5) in the demise of Qadhafi's regime led to a particular role played by its support mission in Libya (UNSMIL).⁷³ The mission's mandate (UN SC Resolution 1973) comprised dialogue support, with the overarching goal of reaching

a political transformation.⁷⁴ In practice, though, due to the increasingly complex setting described above, conflict or even crisis management took precedence over real conflict resolution most of the time.⁷⁵ This second part of the peacebuilding discussion analyses the players, their approaches and the outcomes of third-party mediation, to better understand the various predicaments under which third-party mediation operates in Libya's transition, with a focus on the central UN mediation role.

The slow pace of the political process since 2011 led to questions being raised regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of UN mediation. In practice, external mediation actors tend to follow their own interpretation of a conflict, focusing on a variety of supposed key conflict drivers. Such conflict readings usually give a different weighing to material and ideological conflict features. For instance, the previous SRSB Ghassan Salamé underlined that unequal wealth distribution was a key driver of conflict,⁷⁶ accordingly zooming in on an actual key element of the local, intra-Libyan conflict. At an earlier stage of the conflict, in view of lacking political agreement among the numerous stakeholders, analysts also raised the question if mediation was the right way forward, and how steps including sanctions and political pressure imposed on external interferers could improve the outlook for mediation.⁷⁷

⁷³ The UN SC endorsed a NATO intervention, officially on an R2P-basis.

⁷⁴ The UN SC initially got involved with Res. 1970 (focusing on R2P/Responsibility to Protect, though without reference to mediation), then with resolution 1973 (UNSMIL, tasked to finalise the political transition).

⁷⁵ Nourelhouda Mouhoub, „The Role of the United Nations in Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping: The Case of Libya,“ *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 7, Nr. 7 (2024): 4545–4551.

⁷⁶ Humanitarian Dialogue, *Exiting Chaos*.

⁷⁷ Roberto Aliboni, *What to Do about Libya: Mediation or Intervention?* Documenti IAI 15/03E (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, March 2015).

Fully aware of these types of challenges, peacebuilding literature presents a number of criteria for 'ideal mediation', focusing on prerequisites for effective external interventions. Among its features are the mediator's skills, the mandate, external support and timing – all in relation to macro-level conditions.⁷⁸ Strictly speaking, only addressing the underlying conflict causes will allow for a genuine conflict transformation. Otherwise, the risk is high that efforts will be limited to conflict or crisis management. In Libya's case, the UN mediation process was hindered early on by a lack of uniform member state support, resulting in reduced leverage over local actors.⁷⁹ Over time, these have come to represent their own vested interests, as well as those of their external patrons, often by realising their spoiler potential to undermine ongoing third-party mediation efforts.

Libya and the African Union: A strained relationship

In the earliest phase of the popular upheaval, the African Union (AU) sought to play a role in peace mediation⁸⁰ in parallel to the United Nations. However, in practice, doubts abounded concerning the impartiality of the multilateral organisation due to Qadhafi's substantial financial support. In 2011, an article in *Jeune Afrique* reminded readers that the AU had officially been launched in the Libyan town of Sirte, and that Qadhafi later had presented himself as 'King

of Kings of Africa' at an AU gathering.⁸¹ The author also explained that the lack of strong human rights credentials among African leaders as well the institution's dependence on Qadhafi's largesse explained its lukewarm attitude toward the Libyan insurrection.⁸² On the other hand, the AU was confronted with a special constellation in its mediation attempts since the UN had lost much of its impartiality through its sanctions against Qadhafi, his entourage and Libyan state institutions. After key external actors pursued implicit regime change, and this unilateral approach against one of the parties to the conflict was also reinforced by the UN sanctions' regime, the AU was technically caught between a rock and a hard place from the outset, as both conflict parties subsequently opted for the military option.⁸³

With the two latest SRSs – Bathily and Tetteh – hailing from African states, the AU has come to play a new role fifteen years into the conflict. Recently, the continental organisation confirmed in a statement of its Peace and Security Council that it supports the inclusivity approach of the UN mediation process.⁸⁴ In fact, the current SRS Hannah Tetteh has been underlining the need for

⁸¹ "L'UA a été formellement créée en 1999 par la déclaration de Syrte, après un sommet continental dans cette ville libyenne qui a vu naître le colonel Kadhafi." [The AU was formally instated in 1999 with the Syrte Declaration, following a continental summit in the city which was Colonel Kadhafi's birthplace.] See *Jeune Afrique*, L'UA, trop dépendante de la Libye de Kadhafi pour critiquer le régime, accessed 8 February 2026, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/73608/politique/ua-trop-dependante-de-la-libye-de-kadhafi-pour-critiquer-le-regime/>.

⁸² "La générosité de Mouammar Kadhafi envers l'Union Africaine, son rôle historique dans la création de cette organisation, ainsi que le médiocre bilan de dirigeants africains en matière de démocratie et de droits de l'Homme expliquent la frilosité de l'organisation continentale à l'égard de l'insurrection en Libye, soulignent les analystes." (idem).

⁸³ Portela and Romanet Perroux, *UN Security Council Sanctions and Mediation in Libya*.

⁸⁴ See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/african-union-stresses-support-inclusive-libyan-political-process>.

⁷⁸ Vujić, *Third Party Mediation*.

⁷⁹ Vujić, *Third Party Mediation*.

⁸⁰ Bartu, *Libya's Political Transition*.

a 'Libyan-owned and -managed' process. Therefore, her team has been gathering information from Libyans to feed into the UN mediation process design. On this combined basis, she presented a new roadmap to the UN Security Council in August.⁸⁵

The 'local peacebuilding' paradigm and the idea of favouring bottom-up politics have also been put forward by some analysts. The proposed logic is to circumvent or weaken 'elite bargaining' of established players.⁸⁶ Conceptually, the local dimension is also linked to the issue of inclusivity, normally evolving around the question of ex/including irregular combatants such as militia leaders. In the Libyan case, militias are not represented since they usually fall, grosso modo, under the hypothetical command and control of the two major competing factions. Therefore, the so-called 5+5 military committee, with representatives of West-Libyan and Eastern armed factions is responsible for the negotiation of security matters.

A mixed civilian committee, the 6+6 advisory committee, is tasked, amongst other things, with preparing an electoral law agreeable to both competing governments, the HoR and the HCS. They recently met with UNSMIL's advisory committee (Arabic: al-lajna al-istishari) to pave the way for the elections foreseen in the new roadmap.⁸⁷

As for the role of civil society in peacebuilding, recent laws have been targeting NGOs and further restricting an already atrophied civil society space⁸⁸ which

also works at cross-purposes with more localised peace-building efforts.⁸⁹

Competing mediation formats: Mandates versus interests

Having done his best to get the key political actors in Libya to resolve contested issues last year, Special Representative Abdoulaye Bathily turned out to be a fierce critic of competing initiatives and formats that undermine the UN-led mediation process when he handed in his resignation to SG Guterres. In his view, only the "unity of the international community", i.e. a shared agenda by all relevant and interested players, would enable to translate the UN efforts into tangible outcomes.⁹⁰

An in-depth analysis by Hellmüller and Salaymeh⁹¹ concluded that the system of peacebuilding and mediation changed mainly through the multiplication of actors involved, including those who are part of the conflict as well as 'un-likeminded stakeholders' launching parallel processes. From this angle, multi-party mediation would be a more adequate term to describe the practice, instead of third-party mediation, which suggests a single authorised external party. A central implication of this actor multiplication is that conflict management has gained prevalence over conflict resolution with short term logics being prioritised over a long-term conflict transformation agenda. Furthermore, the increased number of antagonistic actors not only leads to parallel

⁸⁵ See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/tetteh-upcoming-road-map-be-based-libyans-views-end-transitional-phases>.

⁸⁶ Vidal, Reviving alternative conflict resolution approaches in proxy wars; Eaton, *Consolidation of elite network control over Libyan state institutions*.

⁸⁷ See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/advisory-committee-reviews-constitutional-framework-elections-66-joint-committee>.

⁸⁸ HRW, Libya.

⁸⁹ UNDP, *Local Peacebuilding and Resilience Strategy for Libya*.

⁹⁰ As the UN envoy warned, "unilateral, parallel and uncoordinated initiatives contribute to unnecessary complications and to the consolidation of the status quo," and as long as these continue, "there is no way we can move forward." AP News, 17 April 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/libya-unenvoy-resign-elections-parties-foreign-ad5c70cc80531f6874d201e57012b595>.

⁹¹ Hellmüller and Salaymeh, *Multiparty mediation in a changing world*.

negotiation tracks or meeting formats. It also reduces UN leverage, especially over spoilers, and renders the search for common ground illusive. Nevertheless, despite the implications of internationalised conflicts for third-party mediation, in the Libyan case, the UN has been able to maintain its nominal dominance in the emergent mediation market place. However, implementation of negotiated agreements can be undermined easily as the hampered progress of the 2015 LNA implementation or the repeated undermining of scheduled elections has shown.

Under such circumstances, establishing a single political authority by means of political negotiations might appear a goal pursued in vain. The most recent re-entrenchment by Russia in Libya⁹² is a case in point, it is a case where the pursuit of geostrategic goals by an international player renders UN mediation ever more daunting. Yet, the current SRSF Tetteh has embarked on a mission to push the UN negotiation portfolio further, seconded by a recent attempt to relaunch the Berlin process, in particular its IFCL. In the last section, based on the above identification of challenges for external third-party mediation in protracted, internationalised low-intensity conflicts, potential entry-points are presented for mediation and conflict resolution in Libya.

The way forward: Options and recommendations for third-party mediation

In an era of protracted and complex crises, Libya stands out as a paradigmatic case in North Africa. Since the early start of external third-party mediation by the UN, the process became increasingly undermined

by three key factors: a cemented geographic divide, the multiplication of external actors and the persistence of rogue, non-state armed factions. Since the end of the second civil war (2014-2015), two rival governments have firmly installed themselves, leading to a geographical division and institutional splits. In a parallel process, a multitude of external actors with a stake in the Libyan transition have underscored their claims. These tend to side with one of the de facto executives, and sometimes also act as mediators – despite, or actually driven by, their implication in the conflict. Meanwhile, former anti-regime militias started to merge with organised crime, thus weakening state institutions. Yet to date, the UN has managed to uphold its technical monopoly over third-party mediation, as no alternative “Astana-style” competition has emerged. In light of the above detailed challenges to external third-party mediation under the aegis of the United Nations, this final section provides a number of recommendations for action, based on lessons learned from close to 14 years of UN-dominated mediation practice in Libya.

The recommendations refer to both, state actors and non-state, ‘private-diplomacy’ peacebuilding organisations. As for the latter, their potential to contribute either by feeding directly into a high-level mediation process, for instance by facilitating certain tracks, or by serving thematic niches, such as local or environmental peacebuilding, are of interest. The overarching purpose of these action steps should be to support willing Libyan and external stakeholders to overcome societal fragmentation, political divisions and eroded sovereignty – eventually helping to build a unified state. Where necessary in terms of local needs, short-term actions can be identified. Ideally, though, actions that support the long-term goal of national-level conflict transformation should be prioritised,

⁹² Megerisi, *The bear who came for tea*.

such as those driven by the United Nations.

Early on into the Libyan mediation process, Bartu⁹³ noted that “the overarching lesson for mediation from the Libyan crisis in 2011 is the importance of having only one mediation effort and, where possible, having this reflected in Security Council resolutions.” In fact, eleven years later, the same identical statement could be made. In an interview for the Oslo Forum Geneva, the former SRSG Ghassan Salamé highlighted that the main aim of the mediation process should be to avoid becoming part of the fragmentation.⁹⁴ This comment still holds true as of today, as the division along geography, institutions and supporters has not been rolled back. Finally, more recently, an analyst came to the conclusion that “[t]o achieve a lasting resolution, Libyan factions must now unite around an ideational construct that prioritizes reconstruction, democratization, and modernization as integral components of the national project”⁹⁵. As these three statements both capture the essence of the conflict and describe the challenge for external mediation and for national reconciliation, they serve as guiding lines for the following recommendations.

Recommendations

International community and external actors in conflict resolution:

- *Minimise competing negotiation formats*: To avoid ‘becoming part of the fragmentation’, external actors should support a single external, third-party mediation actor, which is the United Nations in the form of the head of UNSMIL/SRSG, based on its respective mandate.

⁹³ Bartu, *Libya's Political Transition*.

⁹⁴ Humanitarian Dialogue, *Exiting Chaos*.

⁹⁵ Srifi, *Conflict resolution in Libya*.

- *Sanctions 1*: Consequently, actors who deviate from this path should face the consequences of their actions, i.e. pay a political price, be they local, Libyan spoilers or non-Libyan actors.
- *Sanctions 2*: This also means reinforcing the existing sanctions regime, in particular its maritime component, to build a credible deterrent against actors who undermine the existing arms boycott and thereby fuel the conflict by empowering their proxies.
- *Sanctions 3*: For Austria this could correspond to a potential role as a non-permanent UN Security Council member (if elected for 2027/28), whereby it could proactively support the UN role in mediation and push for holding accountable those actors who undermine the UN process.
- *Incentives*: The international community should use the conditional de-freezing of LIA assets as a tool to incentivise political progress, especially concerning the search for an agreement on an electoral law, a constitution and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections to create non-interim executive authorities.

Peacemaking and mediation actors:

- *Entry-points*: The identification of the entry-points needs to be performed along the logic of thematic tracks (such as those of the IFCL) and mediation levels (track 1, 1.5, 2, etc).
- *Systemic conflict analysis*: Entry-points could also be identified on the basis of a comprehensive PCA (Peace and Conflict Analysis), ideally on a systems-

based approach to adequately reflect the complexity of the conflict, reflecting actor multiplicity and de facto multi-party mediation.

- *Unify the process:* External third-party mediators should either be supporting the UN directly by diplomatic means or associated parallel tracks (e.g. the Berlin Process) but avoid well-intentioned but unconnected efforts.
- *Do no harm:* This principle also pertains to 'local peacebuilding' schemes -- they should only be implemented as part of larger, national scheme, in order to avoid negative implications for higher-level efforts; this hold particularly true as long as the configuration of the new state has not been carved out and hence the relationship between local communities and the central state institutions has not been clarified.
- *Creativity:* Support creativity to design new approaches: the UN has been repeating the same type of roadmaps, with relatively limited outcome; the timing and proper sequencing of essential milestones – constitution, elections, and SSR/DDR – should be reconsidered accordingly.

Austrian peacebuilding and mediation support

- *Impartiality:* Austrian neutrality could be leveraged to underscore its position as a trustworthy, impartial mediator, without geopolitical interests in Libya; this would allow offering its good offices, in a similar fashion as was done for the JCPOA negotiations.
- *UN focus:* Vienna being a UN city, Austria could offer support the new UN road-

map with activities related to its various tracks, for instance by hosting high-level diplomatic or IFCL meetings on behalf of the UN.

- *Facilitation and mediation support:* For instance, mediation support could be realised by convening working-group meetings in preparation for a next National Dialogue Conference.
- *Data and information collection:* Digital dialogue sessions could be conducted with the support of local facilitators in lieu of thematic polls; this plays an important role for the UNSMIL in view of its stated objective to include local views.
- *Complementarity:* Previous mediation experiences can be built upon in Libya, with the goal of re-engaging in peacebuilding projects that support the larger, UN-led process; this could include local reconciliation or environmental peacebuilding.
- *Liaising:* On a national level, involved peacebuilding actors, be they state or non-state entities, should liaise pro-actively with each other to ponder which avenues align best with roles of supportive players within the UN system.

Despite close to fifteen years of externally supported third-party mediation, the dispute over power in Libya has remained at the stage of conflict management, unable to move on to a comprehensive, negotiated settlement. Even though the dispute characteristics will always impact external mediation efforts, these recommendations serve as a set of action points to strengthen conflict resolution and to facilitate an exit from the political impasse.

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