

# A Libyan Solution to a Libyan Challenge

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Brief Analysis

**Perhaps now is the time for the United Nations to step back. It is also time for our leaders, from East and West, to recognize that a joint way forward is possible.**

**T**he eyes of the world may be fixed on Gaza, with Ukraine and the Houthi threat to Red Sea shipping also jostling for attention. But there is another country which the world should be watching intently. Libya is of key geostrategic importance. Five times larger than Germany, it occupies almost 2,000 kilometers of strategically sensitive Mediterranean coastline. It is also a conduit route for huge numbers of desperate migrants and refugees heading for Europe, with over 700,000 clustering along its shores. Libya also has the largest proven oil reserves in Africa today—a vital concern as the Ukraine conflict continues to threaten the security of Europe’s energy supplies. But it is also a country divided by guns and politics, with two competing governments dividing East and West, each backed and militarily supported by a range of competing foreign powers.

In early 2021, the Government of National Unity (GNU) based in the West was put in place through a United Nations-backed process as an interim administration which was supposed to deliver democratic national elections in December of that same year, with the intention of establishing a more permanent Libyan government. Yet three years later the GNU remains in place in Tripoli. It justifies this persistence by arguing that the country is not ready for elections, and it still enjoys a grudging degree of international recognition due to its initial remit.

In Eastern Libya, though, the House of Representatives (HoR) have created a rival Government of National Stability, backed by the Libyan National Army, and this administration controls the majority of the country’s land mass along with the bulk of Libya’s oil-producing areas. As with so much of Libya’s recent history, the role and influence of the HoR has shifted and changed. Originally the product of the 2014 parliamentary election, the HoR was driven into exile in the East of the country, where it supported the Tobruk-based government of Abdullah al-Thani. Later, when the GNU came into being as an interim administration with the promise of early (same year) democratic national elections, the HoR supported that temporary administration, but by September 2021 that support had waned and it

passed a no-confidence vote against the GNU, endorsing the rival Government of National Stability, based in the city of Sirte. Unsurprisingly, the divide between the two administrations has led to armed confrontation and at one point an attempt by the HoR to seize control of Tripoli. This failed, and the country lurched back into its state of functional but unhappy division.

Today, Libya has found a precarious balance of sorts, with certain institutions –such as the Central Bank and the National Oil Corporation–operating in cooperation with both administrations. But that can only be a temporary phenomenon.

The current system of divided governance is too riddled with conflict and competing interests to survive for long. The UN sees that, and with strong international support has been pressing for a renewed election process. But despite some diplomatic positioning by both sides, the reality is that the UN initiative appears to have ground to a standstill, its wheels spinning in the desert sands.

Libya is a country on which foreign interests have attempted to impose their will throughout much of our recent history. And in almost every case, the result has been to the detriment of the Libyan people. Perhaps now is a moment in history when that pattern can be broken.

The UN is unarguably well-intentioned, and much of what it seeks to put in place makes some sort of sense for Libya. But it's not a Libyan solution. Yes, there has been a degree of consultation with Libya's leaders, and some trimming and adjustment around the edges of the plan, but essentially what the UN hopes to impose on the country is a solution concocted in its own corridors.

Perhaps now is the time for our foreign friends to be a little less prescriptive; to listen, rather than instruct; to support a process rather than attempting to deliver one.

Libyans are not opposed to the concept of a central government addressing the needs of the country as a whole. The leadership of both sides have repeatedly stated their support for this, most recently following talks in Cairo hosted by the Arab League. But these statements have not reflected whole-hearted support for an early UN-imposed solution, though there is certainly a pragmatic recognition that certain functions truly need to be coordinated and directed on a whole-nation basis. That is why the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank already function across the jurisdictional divide. There are other areas, too, which would almost certainly benefit from central government.

But what the UN has failed to recognize is the strong sense of separate identities that shapes Libya's different regions. Historically, Tripolitania in the Northwest, Cyrenaica in the East, and Fezzan in the South West have functioned very separately from one another. The Ottoman government recognized these as entirely separate provinces. With this sense of distinctive regional belonging among a population less than three quarters the size of London, spread in distant clusters across this huge country, as well as the strongly tribal nature of much of Libyan society, you have a land where identity and control has naturally fallen into local and regional patterns. The central control of the Qaddafi years was in many ways an aberration, atypical of Libya's history and culture.

However, I do not believe that either government is wholly opposed to the concept of a single, national administration controlling important areas of shared national interest. But quite reasonably, neither side wishes to see vital areas of regional autonomy and security surrendered to a distant authority which may not share or understand their particular needs.

So where from here? First, we need the UN to take two steps back; to recognize that their attempts to impose their own construct of an electoral framework on the Libyan nation will never truly succeed. Instead, the UN can play a hugely valuable role as a facilitator, and the appointment of the excellent Stephanie Khoury as the new Deputy to the UN envoy in Libya will certainly enhance that capability.

The next step is that both governments now need to work together to find a way forward. They share the same desire for powerful regional autonomy. They also both recognize the pragmatic value of a national administration across certain necessarily national interests. Working together, they can recognize and accept the balances and separations that must apply. This in turn can define the nature and scope of any proposed national administration, while protecting the vital interests of the different regions. There will certainly need to be a federal structure but not political federalism. In other words, there will be specific tasks and responsibilities that must be addressed and represented on a national basis: a single Prime Minister, and the Foreign Ministry, Interior Ministry, Central Bank and National Oil Corporation must also all function on a national basis. But the work of the Health Ministry, Education Ministry, Economic Ministry and multiple other areas of government should be the responsibility of municipalities or states. Security funding has to be a national responsibility, managed through the defense and interior ministries, but the three regions must each have operational control over the armed forces in their territory, with representatives of each region appointed to the office of the Chief of Staff. All this may not match the accepted political formulae of the United States or Europe, but it reflects the realities and needs of our very different country. Of course, this will not be easy or straightforward. There is distrust to be overcome, and interests to be protected and promoted. Revenue sharing will be an immediate and hugely challenging problem, and must be addressed at the outset of any negotiations. Around 70% of the Libyan population is in Tripolitania, but 90% of the country's natural resources are in Fezzan and Cyrenaica. Reaching agreement on fair and equitable distribution of revenue will be a difficult task. But both governments have able and pragmatic people within their leadership. They will know that a structure negotiated and shaped in Libya, reflecting Libya's unique needs and characteristics and protecting the vital autonomy of its regions, must be the best and most workable way forward. However, when challenges and disagreements do arise, this may be where the UN can play a role, as a facilitator and friend, but never as an external autocrat, imposing its own extrinsic vision.

When that process reaches a fruitful conclusion, the UN will have a vital role to play through the power of endorsement and recognition, and potentially with skilled and experienced operational support in the actual implementation of any agreed democratic process.

So, perhaps now is the time for the UN to step back. It is also time too for our leaders, from East and West, to recognize that a joint way forward is possible, providing a Libyan solution to a Libyan challenge. Essential national interests can be managed on a national basis. This is already understood. But recognition that a critical degree of local autonomy can exist within this Libyan solution will bring key actors on board, and a Libyan solution will be achievable. ❖

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