

# Libya's New Government: A Sign of Hope or Prematurity?

Analysing the initial challenges of new-Prime Minister Dbeibah's administration, and where action needs to be taken for a successful political outcome.

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RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – *POLICY BRIEF*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a landmark moment for the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), discussions in Geneva did indeed turn to select a new interim unity government<sup>1</sup>, a government of technocrats, as a short-term solution to establish the necessary conditions for scheduled elections announced<sup>2</sup> for 24 December 2021. Delegates elected on 5 February 2021 were Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah, a businessman from Misrata, as Prime Minister of the new Government of National Unity (GNU), and Mohamed Younes Menfi, a former ambassador to Greece, to the head of the Presidency Council.

The establishment of a new government represents a new chapter in Libya's path towards a sustainable political settlement. Early signs for the government's success are encouraging; the eastern House of Representatives (HoR) voted on 10 March to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55955228>

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1077692>

endorse the GNU<sup>3</sup>, which overcomes a key stumbling block regarding political legitimacy through buy-in from political players from all sides of the Libyan spectrum. However, success is not a foregone conclusion with many outstanding issues and priorities that need to be addressed as soon as possible.

## 2. CHALLENGES FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY

### 2.1 Allegations of Corruption

One of the more remarkable aspects of Dbeibah/Menfi's election was how unexpected the outcome was. When lists of potential candidates were presented to delegates at the LPDF, comprised of figures from both the HoR and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), the most notable candidates were HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh and GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga, two extremely influential political figures and whose combined presence was seen<sup>4</sup> as a foregone conclusion. In the first round of voting, Bashaga/Saleh did come in first place with 37 votes, but without sufficient votes to have won outright. However, the victory of Dbeibah/Menfi came through the second round with 39 votes.

In the aftermath of this success, allegations<sup>5</sup> of vote-buying surfaced with claims that delegates were offered bribes of between \$150,000 to \$200,000 to vote for the Dbeibah list, which were confirmed in an official UN report on the process. Elham Saudi, director of Lawyers for Justice in Libya, and member of the LPDF who abstained from the election vote said<sup>6</sup>:

*"The root cause of this is there was a rejection of any meaningful criteria to those standing concerning their record, and the allegations against them, concerning human rights and corruption. That approach is now risking undermining the credibility of the whole process."*

This question of record seems to refer to pre-existing concerns<sup>7</sup> over the character of Dbeibah, an individual who made his money through a close working partnership

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/libyan-parliament-approves-unity-government/a-56826306>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/signal-risk-on-libya-one-and-united/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/02/libyas-interim-pm-elected-through-bribery-un-inquiry-says>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/02/26/feature/politics/what-does-dbaibas-appointment-to-head-a-national-unity-government-in-libya-mean-for-egypt/>

with former leader Muammar Gaddafi and was eventually investigated<sup>8</sup> in 2014 on suspicion of embezzlement and abuse of office as part of attempts to recover assets from Gaddafi-era associates.

## 2.2 Questionable Partiality

Despite a principal urge for a new unity government as an impartial blank slate to foster conditions for democratic elections, the election of Dbeibah is seen as a victory for Turkey<sup>9</sup>, who has been heavily invested in Libya in support of the western-based GNA. Dbeibah, and figures in his close circle such as family members, have reportedly<sup>10</sup> close ties with political figures in Turkey. Dbeibah's cousin, for instance, entered a political alliance with figures sympathetic to Turkey to form the Peace and Reconciliation political bloc in 2018.

On 9 March 2021, following his election, Dbeibah stated during a press conference<sup>11</sup>:

*"The Libyan-Turkish agreement in the Eastern Mediterranean is in the interest of the state of Libya...Libya has gained a fine share of its right to gas."*

This refers to a maritime agreement signed between the GNA and Turkey on 27 November 2019 that demarked a maritime border in the eastern Mediterranean that was favourable to Turkey, and Turkish offshore natural gas interests. Prior to the vote of confidence by the HoR, this statement caused alarm<sup>12</sup> for some in the east of Libya, including the Head of the Defence and National Security Committee of the HoR, Talal al-Mayhoub who urged caution in endorsement of Dbeibah due to this question of political partiality.

A failure of the GNU to establish itself as an impartial political institution could indeed catalyse renewed conflict, especially from those political actors in the east of Libya opposed to Turkish involvement. For now, the GNU had received support<sup>13</sup> from

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[https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304734304579515773864198850?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304734304579515773864198850?mod=article_inline)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/libya-has-staged-an-unlikely-comeback-the-united-states-can-help-make-it-stick/2021/03/19/415a7446-8807-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/libya-has-staged-an-unlikely-comeback-the-united-states-can-help-make-it-stick/2021/03/19/415a7446-8807-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/02/26/feature/politics/what-does-dbaibas-appointment-to-head-a-national-unity-government-in-libya-mean-for-egypt/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/deal-with-turkey-in-favor-of-libya-pm-dbeibah-says/news>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/abdul-hamid-dbeibah/libyan-mp-criticises-new-pm-accepting-turkish-presence-libya>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cnbcfrica.com/2021/signal-risk-on-libya-one-and-united/>

international actors across the political spectrum, and most tellingly a statement of support from Khalifa Haftar who expressed<sup>14</sup> “the support of the armed forces for the peace process.” Thus, it is contingent upon the GNU to ensure that its operation is fair and balanced moving forward.

### 3. URGENT PRIORITIES

#### 3.1 The Need to Fully Implement the Ceasefire

However, what is more pressing is the persistence of more than 20,000 foreign fighters within Libya<sup>15</sup>, as well as large quantities of foreign armaments that were imported into Libya despite a UN arms embargo. The presence of military assets linked to foreign powers like Turkey<sup>16</sup>, as well as mercenaries from the Russian Wagner Group who have entrenched their military positions in and around the ceasefire line at Sirte<sup>17</sup>, have been a persistent reminder of the failure to fully implement the 23 October 2020 ceasefire agreement<sup>18</sup>, and present a massive spoiler to the peace process.

UN Special Envoy Ján Kubiš urged<sup>19</sup> the UN Security Council to provide concrete support to Libya by providing ceasefire monitors, which has been a constant request ever since the agreement was signed in October. Luckily, the ceasefire itself is, for the most part, holding but, as we have seen from in the past, more needs to be done to avoid any future violent outbreaks. All foreign military elements need to withdraw from the country urgently.

#### 3.2 Uniting the Central Bank

In the mid-term, the GNU will need to improve the economic conditions within Libya, as one of the first steps to disincentivise both militia recruitment, as well as being able to establish better State-institutions across the country. Within this, steps towards unifying the two Central Banks are necessary and paramount. Since 2014, the Central Banks have split into a west and east administration that catered for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/tunisia-pushes-for-un-monitors-for-libyas-frail-ceasefire/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://thearabweekly.com/turkish-backed-build-seen-targeting-sirte-eastern-libya>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/libya-civil-war-russia-turkey-fighter-planes/?itid=lk\\_inline\\_manual\\_7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/libya-civil-war-russia-turkey-fighter-planes/?itid=lk_inline_manual_7)

<sup>18</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1076852>

<sup>19</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088192>

their respective governments, which in turn reinforced the political division within the country.

There have been marked improvements since the ceasefire agreement from last year. The two banks met<sup>20</sup> for the first time in six years in December 2020, a meeting that resulted in an agreement to unify the exchange rate for the Libyan dinar, as well as removing taxes on foreign exchange transactions. These two measures should limit corruption through access to preferential trade rates and act as a preliminary measure against the black-market economy, whilst helping stimulate foreign investment to assist with the country's economic recovery. This did come at a cost of devaluation, with the dinar adjusted from LYD1.4 to LYD4.48 to the dollar.

There have also been discussions<sup>21</sup> of reunifying the country's budget. This is significant, because it would then imply that either side accepts the economic cost of military actions by the other. The reality is, however, that these steps to begin economic recovery may be necessary, especially when we consider that most of Libya's significant oil assets are currently frozen by the UN at the Libyan Foreign Bank<sup>22</sup>, their release contingent upon progress being made on the political recommendations of the LPDF.

### 3.3 Security Sector Reform

From there the issue of security sector reform becomes both the most difficult, but most essential to address. Even with unified political and economic institutions, so long as Libya's security framework is dispersed into isolated militia groups, there can be no long-term stability. The GNU will need to consider proposals for a comprehensive DDR programme, and provide ways and means for combatants to either return to civilian life or join an official armed institution. This also raises the awkward question of what to do with Haftar and his forces, whose size is too considerable to dismiss out of hand and need to have some route to a normalised institutional functioning.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://mena-advisors.com/2021/01/libya-looking-up>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/01/12/western-and-eastern-libyan-delegation-meet-to-discuss-unification-of-budget-part-of-2020-maetig-hafter-resumption-of-oil-production-export-agreement/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1080272>

Eventually, a line will need to be drawn in terms of grievances between sides and individuals for everyone to move forward. This will have to be balanced with real claims for justice from victims. Outside of the very worst perpetrators that could face prosecution, the international community could help to set up some sort of financial reparations and compensation framework for victims of the general war climate.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As we can see, there are several outstanding questions for the new Dbeibah administration, and, perhaps more significantly, even more reforms and actions that the government needs to implement, including supporting the existing ceasefire framework and helping reforms in key sectors such as the economy and security. The international community needs to stand ready to support the GNU so that it is successful in its task of establishing sufficient conditions for elections. Ultimately, there is a great opportunity for a genuine change in Libya, but this is not yet a foregone conclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of National Unity:

- Implement the specifications of the October 2020 ceasefire agreement immediately, especially urging foreign collaborators to withdraw their forces from combat zones.
- Act as soon as possible to unify the two Central Banks, and in turn access Libya's financial oil assets.
- Develop a comprehensive DDR action plan to assist in normalising the security sector by integrating combatants or allowing them to return to civilian life. This plan needs to have provisions for all domestic armed actors across Libya.

To the international community:

- Support the new Government of National Unity through collaborating on key reforms and initiatives and be ready to offer technical and financial support where necessary.
- All foreign forces and military assets within Libya need to withdraw immediately, as per the October 2020 ceasefire.
- Support the Libyan ceasefire through the urgent deployment of United Nations international monitors.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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