

The Libyan Ceasefire: Is 2021 Finally the Year for Elections?

A cautionary analysis of renewed calls for elections in Libya, following the 2020 ceasefire, and how the international community could help.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – POLICY BRIEF

By Ben Lowings – Political Analyst

1. INTRODUCTION

On 23 October 2020, following months of fighting, Libya's factions signed a permanent ceasefire agreement that was heralded by the UN¹ as a "historic achievement". This was accompanied by a November meeting of the Joint Military Commission, a group of representatives from both the GNA and LNA, in Ghadames that determined a set of recommendations² aimed at implementing the ceasefire deal. The principal requests were the removal of foreign fighters, a freeze on training by foreign groups, a general withdrawal of armed groups from the front lines, as well as several general requests such as prisoner exchange. Apart from this latter point, despite the agreement, there has yet to be serious implementation of the other three points leading to fears of another potential

¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/historic-libya-cease-fire-agreed-un-says/a-55370227>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1076852>

broken ceasefire. Acting head of the UNSMIL, Stephanie Williams, said³ in December that an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters were still in Libya, despite the agreed deadline for their withdrawal being 23 January 2021. These fears on 4 January 2021 led to neighbouring Tunisia, current president of the UN Security Council, calling⁴ for international monitors to be installed in Libya to support the ceasefire.

Despite these worrying signs, the international community once again has fast-tracked discussions to push towards national elections, which have become a panacea for many foreign observers. The UN resumed the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in November⁵, following the ceasefire, whose key objectives include discerning a unified governance framework that will lead to national elections. This was followed by an announcement⁶ later that month by Williams that Libya will hold national elections on 24 December 2021, a symbolic date as it is Libya's Independence Day. However, this is not the first time that there has been a push for elections in Libya, and many deadlines have come and gone in the past. Should we expect this time to be different? As it stands, we have many reasons to be sceptical of a successful outcome by the end of this year.

2. LIBYAN ELECTION FEASIBILITY

2.1 Lack of Ceasefire Implementation

Firstly, there needs to be at least an implementation of the ceasefire agreement, and as briefly mentioned there is little time for this to happen, nor is it obvious if there is political will for this to happen. Many of the key actors, both international and domestic, have not committed to implementation. Despite calls for withdrawal of all foreign fighters, in December the Turkish parliament approved an 18-month extension of its missions in Libya, where it has sent fighters and militias. Disputed reports from the LNA claimed⁷ to show a large mobilisation of militias armed with Turkish weapons near to the ceasefire line in Sirte. From the other side, and as an

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/tunisia-pushes-for-un-monitors-for-libyas-frail-ceasefire/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-ceasefire-un-relaunches-inclusive-political-forum-amid-growing-sense-hope>

⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1077692>

⁷ <https://thearabweekly.com/turkish-backed-build-seen-targeting-sirte-eastern-libya>

example of lack of domestic will, the leader of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar, said⁸ that he would target Turkish troops in Libya should they continue to be there indicating a continued willingness to engage in armed conflict. And even should this military disengagement be honoured, there is no clear sign that the parties would genuinely be willing to negotiate in the run-up to elections as shown by the public refusal⁹ of the GNA to negotiate with one of the opposite parties in the form of Haftar.

2.2 Poor Domestic Conditions

Secondly, the domestic political conditions do not appear to be sufficient for holding elections. While the LPDF's goal to address certain framework issues to hold elections is a good step, it is insufficient if the main power holders have no incentive to buy-in to a process that will ultimately result in them losing their power and privileges that come with it. Additionally, there are concerns that the domestic actors themselves, even in their opposing sides, are far from unified. We have seen a divergence in the east between the views of Haftar and House of Representative leader Aguila Saleh, the latter far more inclined to buy-in to diplomatic solutions to the crisis. Meanwhile in the west, GNA leader Fayez Al-Serraj had announced his intention to resign by the end of October 2020. But this was rescinded following calls, including from "leaders in friendly countries", to "avoid a political vacuum". Observers¹⁰ have suggested some of those leaders included Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, and Turkey's President Recep Erdogan, the latter who have cultivated close ties with the GNA under Serraj. The fear of a political vacuum without Serraj underscores concern that the GNA does not have clear political unity.

2.3 Continuing International Interference

Thirdly, and this has been explored somewhat already, but it is unlikely that Libya will have sufficient conditions for elections while international involvement remains high. Turkey, as above, has been a key player in Libya. Meanwhile the role

⁸ <https://middle-east-online.com/en/haftar-threatens-target-turkish-forces-libya>

⁹ <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20201211-we-refuse-any-deal-that-would-involve-haftar-libya-s-defence-minister-tells-france-24>

¹⁰ <https://ahvalnews.com/libya-turkey/turkish-role-suspected-serraj-decision-stay-libyas-prime-minister>

of Russia has also been complex¹¹, often simplified to being a simple supporter of Haftar, while instead playing a much more pragmatic approach. Sometimes having supported offensive military action through the form of Wagner Group mercenaries, other times openly criticising Haftar's actions and calling for diplomatic solutions. Within this approach are the relations between Russia and Turkey, sometimes explicitly fighting and on other occasions engaging in backdoors diplomacy. And this is not the full extent of international interference. Former UNSMIL Head Ghassan Salamé estimated¹² that some six to ten countries have direct involvement in the Libyan conflict so far.

3. POSITIVE SIGNS ON THE HORIZON?

3.1 Egypt Meets With GNA

However, there are some positive signs on this front. Egypt made its first visit of a high-level delegation to the west of Libya in late December, the first such visit since 2014, which followed a similar visit of GNA delegates to Cairo in November. According to Egypt¹³, the meetings discussed "mutual security challenges and ways to enhance security cooperation", as well as ways to implement the October ceasefire. Even if this only amounts to symbolic dialogue, this shows that when there is political will, compromises and diplomatic steps are achievable.

3.2 Does Biden Offer Hope of US Support?

Another key actor is the US, where there is much speculation over what role the new Joe Biden Presidency will have on foreign policy in Libya. While it is unlikely that the US will play a heavy role under Biden, especially given the role of the US during the NATO intervention that toppled Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, what is less clear is on what side, if any, Biden's policy will fall. A natural thought would be that the US will be opposed to Russia, and hence to Haftar, but as stated earlier, Russia's role in Libya is not so one-dimensional. A different possibility is for the US

¹¹ <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>

¹² <https://www.ipinst.org/2019/05/a-conversation-with-srsg-ghassan-salame-head-of-unsmil#4>

¹³ <https://www.dw.com/en/libya-top-egyptian-officials-visit-tripoli-for-first-time-in-years/a-56070512>

to orientate its foreign policy with mind to Turkey¹⁴, either to curb its influence as a way to regain some lost favour with certain EU Member States like France, or to make concessions to prevent a feared push of Turkey, a NATO member, further into Russia's orbit. But what is more probable is that the US will act more as a guarantor of the UN dialogue process, and the general push towards a compromise solution. The issues of Turkey and Russia are ultimately proxies within Libya that the US can approach in other international arenas, whereas within Libya itself there is more of an urgency to ensure an end to the fighting. Should the US back the Tunisian-led initiative to send international monitors of the ceasefire and assist in its implementation, there may be a better chance to encourage the parties to de-escalate.

3.3 Is A Government of Technocrats the Way Forward?

Should we look for a solution that does not hinge all hope on successful elections? One option could be to force a reset on the domestic political conditions by forming a temporary unity government of technocrats, to make the sufficient conditions for hosting elections possible, and is becoming a preferred option among some commentators¹⁵. We must remain cautious of this however, for this has been attempted as a solution in Libya before, most recently in the form of the GNA itself. There should be strict safeguards in place, such as restrictions on the ability to stand in future elections as well as transparency in their economic streams, so that if any new temporary government is formed, it is non-partisan, and those temporary technocratic politicians cannot exploit their status for personal gain.

4. CONCLUSION

In any case, history has shown that the status quo of conflict and political fragmentation in Libya remains stubbornly unchanged, despite multiple attempts over many years to counteract violent escalation through international mediation and pushes for ceasefires and dialogue processes. It may be better to instead capitalise on small, but important, victories such as the new meetings between the GNA and Egypt and push for better confidence building across the Libyan political spectrum. In the meantime, implementing the ceasefire will be an imperative for

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/us/politics/us-turkey-trump-erdogan.html>

¹⁵ <https://eutoday.net/news/politics/2020/can-technocratic-government-provide-a-solution-for-libyas-transition>

the international community, so the Tunisian request for international observers would indeed be a good short-term measure for confidence. And dialogue processes, such as the LPDF, are welcome, but they should focus on the constitutional conditions for eventual elections, rather than timetabling elections themselves, as well as asking the tough question of how to increase political buy-in for the diplomatic process across Libya's parties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To all Libyan actors:

- Utilise the framework of the LPDF to build the fundamental constitutional requirements for elections, as well as measures that increase political buy-in from all parties.
- Should a temporary government of technocrats be considered in the short-term, ensure there are sufficient safeguards in place to avoid financial exploitation and instances of executive power retention.

To the international community:

- Support the Libyan ceasefire through the urgent deployment of United Nations international monitors.
- Capitalise on recent diplomatic developments by refocussing all efforts on a diplomatic solution that is inclusive and sustainable for all across the political spectrum.

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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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Author

Ben Lowings | Political Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466