



Diwan

All Against All

Michael Young

In an interview, Emadeddin Badi talks about today's Libya, which faces both civil war and state collapse.

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Comments (+)

Emadeddin Badi is a 26-year-old Libyan-born activist and development practitioner. He currently works at the North Africa branch of the United Kingdom-based Peaceful Change Initiative. Badi is also CEO of Project Silphium, a youth-led civil society organization, where he focuses on women and youth's inclusion in peace and security. He has taken part in several youth and leadership programs and is an intercultural leader and fellow with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, with expertise in migration, countering terrorism, and conflict resolution. Badi holds a licentiate in French language from the University of Tripoli, Libya, and a Bachelor's degree in business management from the University of Essex. Diwan interviewed him in early September to get his perspective on the current situation in Libya, and future prospects there.

Michael Young: Where do we stand today in Libya, with the existence of two rival governments? What does this foretell for the country's future?

Emadeddin Badi: The situation in today's Libya has features both of civil war and state collapse. On the one hand, despite being sporadic, conflict is ever-present and risks of escalation are pervasive in an increasingly fragmented landscape. Internally, none of Libya's rival factions has the elements allowing it to enhance social cohesion and prevent total disintegration. At the same time, there is a lack of incentives for Libya's factionalized political elite to spearhead a political reform process, which has translated into deadlock. Despite the fact that leaders of the different factions have had multiple opportunities to meet for talks under the auspices of Western powers, such efforts have failed to break their intransigence. Regrettably, there has also been virtually no progress on the action plan of the United Nations' special envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, which was endorsed by the UN Security Council in December 2017.

The hallmark of Libya's collapse as a state and its downward spiral toward more turmoil has been the "curse of dichotomy." As any Libya observer can see today a status quo prevails thanks to the existence of two rival governments, one in Tripoli, the other in Benghazi. This political divide has become increasingly normalized, plaguing almost all of Libya's once sovereign institutions.

Illustrating this reality was the latest conflict in Libya's oil crescent last June. It culminated in Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army, handing over oil ports to a National Oil Company (NOC) based in Benghazi. This was a reality check in that it showed how even the venerable Tripoli-based NOC (which doesn't recognize its Benghazi-based homonym) could not elude the curse of political division, despite the fact that it has helped avert the collapse of what remains of Libya's economy. What this tells us is that unless there is major reform of the state, which includes an economic overhaul and security-sector reform, Libya's governance problems will persist so that partition may occur.

MY: Libya's conflict has morphed into a wider regional conflict in some regards. Can you briefly describe how outside Arab or European actors are involved in the country, and the impact of this.

EB: Despite the fact that much of Libya's violence is unfolding inside the country, the conflict is inextricably linked to foreign powers jockeying for geopolitical influence. Their motivations are rarely altruistic and they are engaged in competing agendas, which in turn has led to destruction.

Perhaps the most palpable line of conflict in Libya has been that between proponents and opponents of political Islam, which has dominated public discourse in the country since the 2011 uprising. The fast pace with which Qatari-backed Islamist groups, such as the Libyan offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, were perceived to be making political gains in 2011 was considered a threat by Abu Dhabi. The latter's regional pursuit of a secular agenda has translated into backing actors that can deter the influence of Islamism in Libya. From the get-go, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have had fundamental differences over their respective visions for a postwar Libya. Since 2011, both have exploited local conflicts to enhance their political sway and injected cash and resources into different groups to coopt them in exchange for influence. Following the crisis with Qatar in the Gulf Cooperation Council, there was a decrease in overt Qatari and Turkish influence in Libya, while blatant violations of the UN Security Council arms embargo by the UAE are still common.

At the same time, neighboring states regard Libya as a security threat. Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt, who all have skin in the Libyan game, have positioned themselves accordingly. The degree of their involvement in the Libyan conflict is dictated by the nature of the perceived threat from Libya to their national security, history, indigenous political developments, and regional alliances.

The above factors have also influenced the involvement of European actors. For instance, Italy has historical links with Libya and perceives sea crossings by refugees embarking from the country as a threat to its national security. On the other hand, France is not directly affected by negative developments in Libya, which, historically, falls outside the traditional sphere of French influence. This, therefore, justifies France's rash gamble on Libyan elections. Whether successful or not, the bet could ultimately lead to a widening of France's influence in previously uncharted territory.

A crucial phenomenon to heed is that the main European players in Libya are threatened by the rise of nationalist movements at home, while the main Arab powers involved in the country have become increasingly authoritarian. This implies that policy toward Libya will become increasingly aggressive and motivated by self-interest, emboldening local actors seeking hegemony. The combination does not bode well for Libya's future as the ripple effects of foreign interference continuously undermine its existence as a polity.

MY: Amid reports that the Islamic State is reemerging in Syria and Iraq, what is the condition of the

group in Libya today?

EB: When it comes to the group's operational capacity, it is often difficult to rely on Libyan estimates, as Libya is a weak link when it comes to intelligence sharing in the Middle East and North Africa. It is nonetheless clear that the Islamic State is still able to coordinate terrorist attacks in the country. The attacks on the High National Election Commission in May 2018 and in Wadi Ka'am more recently underscored that the group is far from undone.

While many speak of the "day after the Islamic State" in Libya, it is worth noting that, broadly, the same causes that gave rise to the Islamic State still exist in the country. These include weak governance, an inability to coordinate with international organizations and institutions, as well as poor capacity for border control. To circumvent these challenges, the strategies adopted for combating the Islamic State have been almost exclusively focused on security (such as that implemented by the United States Africa Command). This fails to address a more holistic response to the group and other terrorist organizations.

Forces that participated in the Bunyan al-Marsous operation in 2016 that expelled the Islamic State from Sirte were disillusioned with the lack of government support and international recognition, especially given the 700 dead in their ranks, most originating from the city of Misrata. This set a precedent that any counterterrorism operation against the Islamic State will often come at a price of weakening one's military position without necessarily gaining any leverage. Grievances, flashpoints, marginalization, and the proximity of other terrorist groups are also tools groups can capitalize upon for increased influence in Libya. That is why an Islamic State resurgence would not be surprising.

MY: There has been much talk of the growing power of Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya. Is there any serious chance that he could emerge as a new strongman in the country, and would he be able to extend his authority to western Libya?

EB: It may be worth answering this question away from the excessive attention with personalities that is so common to Libyan politics, and ask what qualifies a person to be regarded as a national figure in such a polarized environment? In conversations with Libyans from all walks of life, I have found that the vast majority consider optimal political solutions as those that involve the exclusion of their perceived enemies. Haftar has promoted such rhetoric, which in my view hinders his ability to become a "national" strongman. Though Haftar's cooperation with the UAE, Egypt, and more recently France may have bolstered his legitimacy internationally, given that the monopoly over the use of violence has devolved to local armed groups since 2011, creating fragmentation, it will be difficult for him to control enough territory to coerce these groups into accepting him as leader, especially in western Libya. This is why he has opted for political maneuvers that disrupt the status quo there, such as handing over the oil ports to an eastern-based National Oil Corporation, as I said earlier.

MY: There are signs of a hardening by certain European states, above all Italy, in accepting African migrants. How has this affected Libya?

EB: The rise of nationalist movements in several European states, coupled with the politicization of media coverage of migration, has had two effects. First, politicians have had to appeal to the extremes in their political parties and, second, the migration debate has been characterized by cacophony in the European Union. Despite the disparity in the way EU countries have been exposed to migration originating or transiting via Libya, the policy agreed upon has been to externalize borders—in other words to inhibit migration near African territories—often at the expense of human rights. This has made Libya and the central Mediterranean route to Europe the main locations where Italy's and the EU's ad hoc policies to reduce sea crossings have taken place, often with disastrous results.

The European stance has made both smuggling and anti-smuggling operations lucrative businesses. The blurred lines between armed groups, Libya's coast guard, and smugglers have allowed these networks to profit from managing illegal detention centers, intercepting migrants at sea or on land, extorting them, and smuggling them. The Europeans have provided training and equipment to the coast guard, while the leader of one of the most active coast guard units in intercepting migrants was recently sanctioned by the UN Security Council for his complicity in smuggling people to Europe. The Italian government has also criminalized rescue missions in international waters by nongovernmental organizations. Though this has decreased the numbers of arrivals to Europe, it has also increased the death rate at sea. The ongoing clashes in Tripoli have also illustrated how unsafe Libya is for migrants, which I hope will be a wake-up call to alter European policies accordingly.

MY: What is daily life like in Libya for someone like you who lives there? Where do you see the country going in the coming decade?

EB: You ask me this at an interesting time, since a Grad rocket fell a few meters from my house during the recent clashes in Tripoli. Luckily, everyone was safe, but I think that episode depicted daily life in Libya as always being on the brink. If it isn't one's physical safety that is worrisome, it is the psychological stress caused by such things as inflation, insecurity, and uncertainty that plague the country. I work in development but I am also an outspoken activist, which in recent years has become another hazard. My respite has come from meeting like-minded young people from all over the country who share a passion for change and are driven to lead. However, we often joke that we only get to meet outside the country, which is a bad omen for Libya's future. It's hard to foretell whether the upcoming decade will bring about positive change. I am compelled to be optimistic, but at the moment the future seems grim.

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