



Can Libya's Divisions Be Healed?

Summary: Politics in Libya have become hyperlocalized; the absence of a unifying power that can extend control over territory has been a theme ever since the 2011 revolution.

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*The overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011 failed to deliver the democracy that revolutionaries had dreamed of, and Libya is now split between two factions warring for control. Without institutions able to exert nationwide authority, "politics in Libya have become hyperlocalized," says Frederic Wehrey, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of the new book *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya*. This has largely enabled militias vying for power and profits, and, Wehrey says, some Libyans now believe that only an authoritarian leader can provide order.*

What is the political situation in Libya?

The country is basically split in two, with two claims to legitimacy: A parliament in the east, run by General [Khalifa] Haftar, has its own army. In the west is the internationally recognized Government of National Accord, which is not able to extend its authority beyond a few neighborhoods in the capital, Tripoli. It's at the mercy of militias that have carved up [Tripoli] into warring fiefdoms.

Politics in Libya have become hyperlocalized; the absence of a unifying power that can extend control over territory has been a theme ever since the 2011 revolution. Many diplomats involved in preparations for the post-2011 transition underestimated how ruined the country was. It didn't have the muscle fiber for governance, especially in terms of the security sector, and technocratic know-how was severely lacking. So, in 2014, there was a break into open civil war. It was the result of a gradual militarization of politics, where the militias formed alliances with political actors.

At the center of this is a contest for the country's hydrocarbon revenues. This was a legacy of Qaddafi's misrule; he set up this state founded on the distribution of oil rents. There were no political structures, institutions, or civil society. So, when he left, the prize of the oil revenues came up for grabs, and a major theme ever since the revolution has been who is going to control access to this enormous wealth.

Production of oil is down substantially since 2011. Why is that, and what does that mean for the Libyan people?

Initially, it did rebound, back in 2012, but there's been a substantial drop because the various warring parties have tried to grab oil facilities or have blockaded them, using them as leverage in their political contests. Infrastructure has been significantly damaged in the latest round of fighting. The cost has been catastrophic: massive inflation; an exodus of Libyans, in some cases following the paths of migrants across the Mediterranean; electricity shortages; a liquidity crisis. This is utterly bewildering for the country with the largest proven oil reserves in Africa. But even when production was up and revenue was coming in, there was still a huge problem of that wealth reaching the average Libyan because of massive corruption.

What role do municipal governments play?

The real pathology of Qaddafi's rule was that there was no local authority. In the wake of the revolution, people in Libya wanted to escape from hypercentralization, and they wanted to have control over their own budgets and their own affairs. A law was passed that tried to empower municipal governments, but there are still huge problems because there is so much corruption at the national level.

Municipal councils, in some cases, are a bright spot. These towns have been able to deliver services and provide for their constituents, but they've been drawn into the national-level conflict as well. Some town councils are subject to pressure by militias that control various streams of funding.

French President Emmanuel Macron recently hosted a summit with the leaders of Libya's different factions. They failed to establish a national constitution but did set a timeline for elections. How do you expect this to play out?

Theatrical and symbolic gestures like the Macron summit, with this incredibly ambitious timeline for elections, don't move us forward. The proposed elections were seen as a way out of the impasse, but they contain the seeds of even greater instability. Premature elections could open the field for more factional conflict, especially since some key players who wield considerable armed force were not present at the summit. It's unclear if Libyans are going to be ready for this in terms of voting laws, the constitutional draft, or security. Elections without a constitutional framework are opposed by many parties as [potentially] setting up another transitional government that is going to be contested or even an authoritarian ruler for life. There are all sorts of scenarios in which this can go badly, and though elections, based on the Paris summit, [are due to be held] December 10, that is unlikely to happen, in my view.

Could this climate lead to the rise of another autocrat?

There is a constituency for that among people who saw the fruits of the 2012 legislative elections, which produced nothing but chaos and division. These elections came quite soon after Qaddafi's fall, without the structures or the foundation for reaching a consensus, for building a true democracy. People became disenchanted with democracy, and with worsening violence and insecurity, they turned to [Haftar,] a strongman, as the solution.

There was a great deal of nostalgia for the military as the only institution that can provide order; it's a beguiling notion. I heard the argument in the east, in Benghazi and [other] areas aligned with General Haftar's forces, that perhaps a transitional period with military rule is needed and that [power would then be] handed off to a civilian government. But how often has that worked in the Arab world?

The prospect of strongman rule is undermined by the multiple centers of power and deep divisions; no single faction or individual is likely to gain full territorial control. Moreover, based on registration for elections and what's happening at the municipal level, there is still grassroots support for participatory politics rather than a return to autocracy.

What has been U.S. policy since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in 2011?

The U.S. policy all along has been one of being in the background—this was [President Barack] Obama's famous mantra of "leading from behind." Basically, the United States supports the UN-backed government in Tripoli, the Government of National Accord, through diplomacy and assistance. There's a massive multinational development-assistance program underway to help that government build its legitimacy by assisting Libyans through infrastructure and development projects across the country. The United States is also quite involved in regional diplomacy, trying to coordinate the efforts of various European and Arab powers.

An enduring U.S. priority in Libya is counterterrorism. U.S. air strikes that assisted Libyan forces during the battle against the Islamic State in 2016 were quite successful. Since then, the United States has conducted a number of air strikes and drone strikes against residual self-proclaimed Islamic State fighters. The strategy right now is one of watch and contain.

Where does the Libyan migration crisis stand?

This has been a huge political, moral, and economic challenge for the Europeans. They've adopted a strategy that has resulted in a significant decrease in migrant crossings. The question is: At what cost? The European approach, and especially the Italian approach, has been to keep the migrants from crossing the Mediterranean through empowering and training the Libyan Coast Guard but also empowering and subcontracting countermigration tasks to the Libyan militias themselves. In some cases, smugglers who were assisting migrants have been converted to countering the migrant flows. This presents a series of moral challenges, given the detention centers and the horrific abuses of these migrants in Libya.

What gives you hope looking forward?

A new generation of Libyans reaching maturity experienced the revolution in their mid-teens. On the one hand, it's cause for enormous optimism. There are grassroots youth movements working toward solutions to Libya's common problems. The more negative development is the psychological and social impact of the trauma of the past seven or eight years. Many youths have known nothing but life in the militias.

The Islamic State's project in Libya has essentially failed, though there are signs that it is regrouping, and militant extremism more broadly could still gather steam in light of the worsening economy, security vacuum and political fragmentation. At the local level, social authorities like tribes have bridged conflicts and implemented social peace. The potential for a way out is there. Much of this hinges on the political maturity and vision of Libya's leaders and also the wisdom and unity of the international community. It also requires institutional reforms, like unifying economic institutions and dealing with militia power while rebuilding the security sector.

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