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Why There's Hope for Libya

Two former top U.N. envoys to Libya recount for the first time how the unraveling of the international order helped devastate an already fractured country and how a renewed international consensus can help Libya's restoration



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Illustration by Joanna Andreasson/Newlines

For the first time in many years, Libyans are marking the holy month of Ramadan in relative peace. The guns, for now, have fallen silent. There is a unified national government that resulted from a peaceful transition of power and handover by the two rival governments that had ruled the country since 2015. National elections are planned for December.

The challenges ahead are many, but we could have hardly imagined such developments back in the dark days between April 2019 and June 2020 when we were serving in the United Nations.

One important date is worth recalling as it captured the mood of that tumultuous period.

It was late in the afternoon in Berlin on Jan. 19, 2020, following a long day of solemn speeches at the German Chancellery. After five months of meetings at the Senior Officials level of the countries and organizations participating, we and our German hosts had produced the Berlin conference, attended by a constellation of world leaders, including from the countries that had intervened

directly in the Libyan conflict. We were ready to review and approve – in the presence of the two Libyan sides invited to attend at the last minute – the 55-point communiqué painstakingly crafted in the many preparatory meetings.

But where was he? Where was Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who had time and again acted as the prima donna in international meetings, including earlier in the same month when he rebuffed a Turkish-Russian gambit to sign a cease-fire agreement in Moscow? It was Haftar, after all, whose attack on Tripoli in April 2019 had been the impetus for this August gathering in the German capital. The world leaders were huddled – German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, and U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, with a clearly disinterested U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo circling in the background – trying to figure out what to do, how to lure the septuagenarian warlord from his hotel to the conference venue. By contrast, the genial and compliant Fayez al-Sarraj, the prime minister of the internationally recognized government in Tripoli, was politely standing by, ready to attend the concluding session. Haftar was a no-show.

This jarring spectacle in Berlin seemed at that moment to capture the global disorder of the latter years of the Trump presidency. The world leaders, including the majority of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, were clearly nonplussed that the renegade leader of a coup d'état against a U.N.-recognized government had dissed them. Haftar's foreign supporters, however, while clearly miffed, were not irritated to the point that they were ready to reconsider their strategic investment in his authoritarian project. At the end of day, their single-issue agendas outweighed their interest in upholding international norms and the international order. And Haftar knew it as well.

Haftar's behavior was based on the assumption that he would prevail militarily in his quest to rule Libya by force. The previous year, he had gathered impressive international material and political support for his attack, the final feather in his cap being a "green light" phone call from U.S. national security adviser John Bolton just days prior to the attack. That call seemed to seal the deal for the Libyan general who nearly 50 years prior had joined the young Moammar Gadhafi

in his 1969 coup that toppled the monarchy, which had run Libya since its independence in 1951, and ushered in a four-decade-long dictatorship.

Haftar had launched the attack on April 4, 2019, while our boss, Guterres, was in Libya to support a U.N.-facilitated, inclusive national conference, not coincidentally set to commence on April 14. Guterres promptly flew from Tripoli to Haftar's redoubt in eastern Libya to request that he call the attack off and pull back his forces. But the U.N. secretary-general's warnings were summarily rejected. That Haftar would launch such a bold attack while Guterres was still in the country and would so bluntly reject the U.N. leader's call for restraint were further manifestations of the global disorder.

Haftar's attack would lead to thousands of Libyans maimed and killed, and hundreds of thousands displaced. Grisly human rights abuses would be committed, including mass killings in the city of Tarhouna. The attack would herald an uptick in the already unprecedented and illegal foreign intervention in the Libyan conflict. Today there are at least 20,000 mercenaries and foreign forces in Libya partially or fully occupying Libyan military installations.

Not surprisingly, Haftar's attack also killed the U.N. political process that we had spent over a year building. We had known of Haftar's ambitions and his threats to rule the country by force, to purge Tripoli of the militias, and to eradicate "political Islam." His threat to use force had hung over our necks like the sword of Damocles and made urgent our efforts to pursue a peaceful solution.

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The April 4, 2019, attack changed all that. It laid bare the sharp differences on Libya policy in the U.N. Security Council that had heretofore been papered over with reflexively hollow statements of support for the special representative of the secretary-general and the U.N. political process. Over the next weeks and months, the Security Council became entirely sterile, unable to produce a simple statement to condemn this stunning breach of the international order. The greatest shock was the silence from the U.S., a stunning reversal of

longstanding U.S. policy toward Libya. We will never know what would have happened had senior U.S. leaders instead chosen to warn Haftar against his attack, admonished his regional supporters – among them close U.S. allies – or even gone so far as to threaten him with the use of air power. We were grateful for the principled stance taken by career U.S. diplomats in Washington and in the field to correct the policy and their strong support for the work of the U.N. Support Mission in Libya over the past year.

Initially jolted by Haftar's attack, we could have thrown in the towel, or we could have grouched loudly, and likely ineffectively, about the perfidy of the so-called international community. But we lived in Tripoli. We saw firsthand the suffering, the targeting of ambulances and health clinics, the strikes on civilian infrastructure, the heartless targeting of a detention center housing helpless migrants, the hundreds of thousands forced to flee their homes in Tripoli's southern suburbs. We had to do what we could to stop the bloodshed.

We decided that a new strategy was needed, a strategy that would end the war and reopen the way to political talks. Whereas our previous plan had been an inside-out one, with the primary emphasis put on gathering the Libyans on Libyan soil, away from the interfering foreigners, the new plan was outside-in. We needed to try to rebuild even a fragile consensus and commitment to end the conflict before we could return our focus to the Libyans. And we needed to build a process that went beyond the broken and divided Security Council; the regional countries intervening directly in the conflict had to be invited.

Thus was born what has come to be known as the Berlin Process. Ghassan spent two hours with Merkel in mid-August 2019, flying to Berlin on the heels of a gruesome terrorist attack that had taken the lives of three of our U.N. colleagues in Benghazi in yet another sign of Libya's continuing unraveling.

Germany was a logical choice to lead the process. It was viewed as a neutral actor by the Libyans and had abstained on the U.N. Security Council resolution (1973) that was adopted in March 2011 and formed the legal basis for the subsequent international military intervention. In 2019, Germany also sat on the Security Council and was head of the Sanctions Committee on Libya. Merkel was

a principled and determined leader and Germany a country with close ties to the regional actors who were directly interfering in the Libyan conflict.

Despite the skepticism and cynicism displayed by many Libyan watchers and analysts, the Berlin Process has proved to be a worthy one. It is a clear demonstration that the international “spirit” is willing to do the right thing even if the occasional national “flesh” is weak. The communiqué signed in Berlin was codified in the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2510, adopted by the Security Council in February 2020.

Sustaining this international grouping should be a top priority of the U.N. and key international actors. It provided the umbrella for the U.N. to launch the three intra-Libyan tracks – military, political, and economic – as well as an umbrella track focusing on human rights and international humanitarian law. The Berlin Process has bound the international community to support the comprehensive process through a deliberate follow-up mechanism at all levels – working, senior officials, and ministerial. It continues to be one of the only international fora where Emiratis and Egyptians will sit down with Turks.

Of course, the folly that began with the use of force was suspended by the use of force. The red carpet unfurled by Haftar to his international backers translated into the introduction of even more weapons, advanced military systems, and foreign forces on the ground, in a country that was already awash in weaponry. (At one point in the last two years, the opposing forces in Libya were engaged in the largest drone war in the world.)

In the fall of 2019, the internationally recognized government, fearful that Tripoli would fall within weeks, turned officially to Ankara for assistance. It was the Turkish assistance, paired with the largest mobilization of Libyan armed groups since the 2011 revolution, that turned the tide. Having advanced as far as the gates of Tripoli, Haftar's forces were forced to retreat from western Libya by June 2020. A cessation of hostilities then took hold in central Libya, buttressed by a U.N.-facilitated cease-fire agreement signed in October 2020, which continues to stand today.

The halt in hostilities and the ensuing calm on the ground allowed the U.N. mission to work directly with the Libyans on the three intra-Libyan tracks

established in January 2020 under the Berlin umbrella. The Libyans soon proved eager to reclaim their agency, their sovereignty, to try to come together to salvage what was left of their battered and bruised country.

And come together they did.

In a remarkable display of the Libyan spirit, led by the military officers for whom the continued foreign presence constituted an assault on their dignity, the joint military committee in October unanimously agreed to the cease-fire and called for the withdrawal of foreign forces. Their calls for national unification and a revival of the Libyan identity put the status quo political class to shame.

The economic track worked quietly and effectively toward the unification of Libya's sovereign financial and economic institutions. They supported a unified budget; an international audit of the two branches of the Central Bank, the results of which will be published in the coming weeks; and the convening of the Bank's board, after an absence of five years, to adjust the exchange rate.

The political forces, coerced by the example set by the other two tracks, came together in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), initially to agree on an election date, and later, in February of this year, to select an interim executive. We ensured a transparent selection and ratification process for the executives that was watched live by millions of Libyans, adding crucial domestic legitimacy and a sense of buy-in that had largely been lacking in earlier international efforts. The ensuing executive, the Government of National Unity, was then approved by a majority of the members of the House of Representatives and broadly welcomed by the international community.

A lot of work remains to be done. In contrast to their silence in 2019, the Security Council rose to the occasion on April 16, adopting UNSCR 2570 calling on member states to require foreign fighters and mercenaries to leave Libya and authorizing the deployment of a U.N. cease-fire monitoring team. The text also calls on the relevant authorities to facilitate presidential and parliamentary elections on Dec. 24, 2021, and welcomes the new national unity government. This resolution is an important signal to the Libyan people of international resolve and commitment to support them on the way ahead.

The Libyan authorities charged with facilitating the national elections should take heed. The two assemblies – the fractured House of Representatives and the High Council of State – have long ago exceeded their shelf life. The first was elected in 2014, the second in 2012. The Libyan people have spoken, time and again, making clear their demand for new elections to usher in a new parliament, to elect anew their representatives, to elect a president, to renew the democratic legitimacy of their institutions. The two assemblies should make haste to create the legislative and constitutional bases needed to enable Libyans to go to the ballot boxes at the end of this year.

The Government of National Unity should honor the contract it has signed with the LPDF, the Libyan people, accountability, and the international community to respect the Roadmap agreed to by the LPDF in Tunis, the Dec. 24 elections date, and to deliver quickly and in an entirely transparent manner on the immediate needs of the Libyan people, including services to the long-starved municipalities, strengthening of COVID-19 prevention measures, and urgent repair of the decimated electrical sector.

The Presidency Council should focus on national reconciliation, the return of internally displaced persons, and transitional justice. Protection of the Libyan people's wealth – the country's oil revenues – through effective and transparent governance and combating corruption at all levels must be a top priority lest those in this government, like their predecessors, lose the trust of the governed.

The international community should send a firm signal to Libyan internal actors, Haftar among them, that this time the world will not stand by should they, once again, pursue a military option. The international diplomatic lattice created by the Berlin Process should continue to be used to direct and constrain the Libyan parties. And the U.S. should once more play its traditional role – using its influence to ensure compliance with the long-established, rules-based, international system – including actively assisting the U.N. in its difficult task to sustain the momentum that has been created.

Global disorder allowed for the upending of the U.N.'s previous peace process in Libya in 2019; a firm reassertion of, and adherence to, global norms can help

ensure that the current process will enjoy a happier fate – one that the Libyan people so clearly deserve.

Williams and Salamé are documenting their experience about Libya in a forthcoming book

TAGS: Angela Merkel, authoritarianism, Benghazi, Berlin Process, Favez al-Sarraj, Germany, Khalifa Haftar, Libya, mercenaries, Middle East, Moammar Gadhafi, Tarhouna, Tripoli, United Nations, United States