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What do the new interim government and upcoming elections in Libya mean for the interests and the security of the EU and its member states?

The de facto cessation of the military conflict in June 2020 was a turning point for the Libyan crisis. Since then, a genuine UN-led peace process is making progress which led to a ceasefire agreement on October 3, 2020, and later to an interim government. The Libyan House of Representatives, which split into two after the 2014 elections, held a session as a whole for the first time and approved the interim government that would lead the country to elections on December 24. The United Nations Special Envoy renewed the UN's call "on all relevant actors and institutions in Libya to comply with UN Security Council Resolutions 2570 and 2571, the LPDF Roadmap, and Berlin II conclusions, to live up to their national responsibilities and facilitate the constitutional basis and enact the legal framework to enable the holding of national elections on 24 December." Experts from CATS Network and other institutions responded to our question.

Barah Mikaïl, Associate Professor, Saint Louis University – Madrid Campus, Madrid

The appointment of a new transitional government in Libya in March 2021 has been welcomed with satisfaction by the European Union. But this does not mean that Libya's problems are behind us.

Europeans are - legitimately – focused on neighbouring Libya and its future prospects. They know that the overthrow of former leader Moammar Gaddafi sounded like good news, but not the chaos that followed.

Today, Libya concentrates much of what Europeans do not like. Among these: institutional weakness, poor average socio-economic conditions for the population, active networks of smugglers, instability, insecurity, absence of reliable forecast, interference from conflicting foreign powers – some of them European- as well as terrorism and radicalism.

But Libya also has something that Europeans are quite interested in: opportunities in the energy field (oil, gas), as well as very promising reconstruction prospects. They also see in development a tool to limit migration movements, by diverting people's attention towards local prospects.

How do Europeans reconcile the two perceptions? By betting on the right horse, and this means supporting the Dbeiba government in its actions, and helping it organize credible and consensual elections at the end of the year.

Besides, it is high time that the EU starts existing as a strong political actor, including towards its own member states that act as spoilers in Libya. If it is capable to adopt sanctions on Russia, this means that it should also be in a position to impose discipline within its own ranks. By doing so, the EU would recover some of what it often lacks: coherence, and respect from others.

Engin Yüksel, Clingendael Institute of International Relations, The Hague

The EU is tapping into the recent progress by increasing its engagement with Tripoli and Benghazi. Nevertheless, the conflicting interests within the EU may resurface if the situation deteriorates. The EU member states are divided, and recently France has been tempted to pursue a partnership with Russia whilst opposing its NATO fellow member, Turkey. On the other hand, the EU may wish to limit its relation with Libya to counter migration, promote economic ties and back a nationwide reconstruction after the 24 December elections. In this regard, the EU supports the UN-led peace process irrespective of a primary enabler, the Turkish and Russian military footprint on Libya's soil. Since the start of hostilities, the forces of Ankara and Moscow have respectively counterbalanced one another with a reasonable level of stability. However, these forces privilege short-term interests over long-term stability.

While Ankara and Moscow tend to convert their military gains into political and economic profits, the EU loses its influence in Libya. In return, the EU has striven to reduce foreign influence as a precondition of ensuring durable stability. Hence, there is no international mechanism to take out the foreign military presence. As a result, no meaningful progress has been recorded in the constitution-making process, election law, the unification of security forces and security sector reform. Therefore, it is in the EU's best interest to focus on limiting Libyan institutions' dependency on foreign influence.

Mary Fitzgerald, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), London; Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazional (ISPI), Milan

If all goes to plan, Libya should experience its third national election since the fall of Gaddafi this December. There are some positive signs in the meantime. A ceasefire agreed in October still holds and Libya's oil-reliant economy is expected to rebound from the months-long blockade of key energy infrastructure by Khalifa Haftar's supporters last year. A COVID-19 vaccination programme is underway. But much can happen between now and December to upend the fragile political

process that has brought eight months of peace. Progress on a crucial security track – which aims to reunify armed forces – has stalled. The interim government has failed to get its budget approved. Disagreements continue over the election framework, with some Libyans opposed to a proposed presidential system. Too many – both inside and outside Libya – are treating elections as a panacea for everything in a country that has known nothing but zero-sum politics since 2011. The EU and its member states should bear in mind that papering over Libya's multiple fissures in the hope that a fresh ballot can offer a solution risks a return to violence and further fragmentation. What's more, such an election is almost certain to be far from free and fair given the brittle security situation, a population bitterly divided by years of war, and Khalifa Haftar's repressive control of eastern Libya. The EU might hope to see a brave new Libya emerge next year but it should also make sure to plan for an outcome that is far from sunny.

Michaël Tanchum, University of Navarra, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), Vienna; The Middle East Institute (MEI), Washington D.C.

The Libyan civil war, disastrous for Libya's citizens, divided the European Union's six Mediterranean members, stymying the Union's ability to set the agenda for relations across its southern borders. The EU's delivery deficit in establishing a sustainable security architecture in Libya perpetuates the rift, resulting in outcomes in Libya that neither represent European values nor serve Europe's interests.

Italy and Spain need to secure their oil and natural gas assets in western Libya while Italy and especially Malta face the pressing security requirement to stem illegal migration and illicit trafficking emanating from the western shores of Libya. With the EU system's failure to adequately address these security needs, Turkey's emergence as western Libya's security provider rendered Rome, Madrid, and Valleta more reliant on their relations with Ankara. France, Greece, and Cyprus, driven by their antagonisms with Turkey outside of Libya, threw their support behind the opposing armed forces in eastern Libya militarily backed by Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. With the EU divided, Brussels lost its agenda-setting ability to Ankara, Moscow, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi.

The successful functioning of a unity government in Libya is now tethered to the strategic interests of Ankara, Moscow, and Egypt – including apportioning shares of the estimated $52 billion in reconstruction projects. The five-month run-up to the December elections provides the EU a strategic opportunity to reset the dynamic in Libya through coordinated action among the EU's Mediterranean member states. If not, the result in Libya will be a regional architecture that will continue to erode the coherence of the EU system.

Mohamed Eljarh, Libya Outlook for Research and Consulting, Libya

Libya's Government of National Unity is an interim executive authority with a limited mandate that expires on 24 December 2021. As a result of the political roadmap agreement reached in November 2020, Libya now has a unified government for the first time since 2014. However, this is a temporary arrangement that offers a limited window of opportunity to consolidate peace and advance Libya's transition to a democratically elected and functional government that serves the interests of Libya and acts as a partner for the international community. This is why ensuring that fair and free elections take place on 24 December should be the focus of the EU and its member states in Libya to avoid another legitimacy crisis risking a return to armed conflict that would further entrench foreign mercenaries and forces on Libya's soil.

The Europeans must envision and adopt actionable policies to ensure elections take place as scheduled and prevent a return to conflict. Clearly, a lack of action on key areas such as reconciliation and trust-building, security sector reform and advancing the military unification process must be addressed. The latter can be achieved by implementing key provisions of the military track, while also strengthening international engagement and monitoring mechanisms for the political, economic and military tracks. It is particularly critical that security and military stakeholders in Libya commit not only to secure elections, but help provide a secure environment for political and civic activities across the country in the run-up to December. Specifically, security actors across the country must commit to upholding an environment that is free from intimidation and fear of arrest or disruption for political or civic activism. Furthermore, fair elections require secure and popular participation of all political groups and currents, especially those that have not had the chance to participate in previous elections due to political isolation or arbitrary detention.

Umberto Profazio, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London

The Berlin process is often portrayed as a pivotal moment in which the EU took back control of the Libyan peace process, pushing the rival factions towards de-escalation and reversing the fragmentation trend that has been ongoing since the revolution. Against this common narrative that tends to overestimate Europe's capacity to reclaim a central role in the Libyan crisis, the persisting presence of foreign forces, mercenaries and non-state armed groups reminds us of the hard power projection that in the latest round of fighting gave a significant edge to Russia and Turkey. Reservations and objections to the Conclusions of the Second Berlin Conference confirmed their enduring entrenchment in Libya, to the detriment of the EU and its member states, some of which have conflicting agendas with both Ankara and Moscow.

On the domestic front, the interim Government of National Unity has still to navigate a challenging political landscape. Volatility has increased and progress on the reunification of the military has been lacking. If security conditions are not met in time for the December elections, this bifurcation will cast a long shadow over the reconciliation process, raising the prospect of a frozen conflict on Europe's southern flank.

Wolfram Lacher, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Since the formation of the Government of National Unity in March 2021, little progress has been achieved towards conflict resolution. Talks on the establishment of unified military command structures and on the withdrawal of foreign forces have stalled. This is largely due to the inherent limits of the settlement reached so far, which allows factions to access state funds through government posts, but does not create a coalition with a common interest in re-establishing central authority. In recent weeks, the pendulum has swung from a superficial sense of unity back towards renewed polarisation, which crystallises around the planned 24 December elections. The struggles unfolding now will block further steps towards military reunification and the withdrawal of foreign forces over the next months. If the deadlock over the legal framework for the elections persists and causes significant delays to the election timetable, a new political crisis could erupt in the run-up to 24 December. If progress towards elections continues, the polarised political, security and media landscape will make for a highly contentious electoral process. The stakes are high: the winners could seek to use their electoral victory to annihilate the political opponents they failed to vanquish on the battlefield. Given this uncertainty, no faction can afford to disarm or lose foreign support in the run-up to the elections, and their results could threaten the delicate balance that has kept the peace since June 2020.

Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

As Libya is now proceeding towards national elections, there is a greater hope for its democratic transition, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The question of legitimacy, which is contested at all levels in Libya since 2014, can be resolved via elections. However, in Libya, what happened in 2014 is a perfect example of how elections can trigger armed conflicts when the process itself is instrumentalised as an extension of the war in order to eliminate political rivals. In the absence of neutral security forces, whether the election results will be accepted between the parties remains unanswered. Particularly, the second point necessitates being more prepared for the risk of conflict.

The absence of the EU-Turkey strategic partnership in Libya undermines European efforts for managing these risks in Libya. Instead, internal rifts on how to respond to Turkey's assertive foreign policy in Libya paralysed the EU in finding a common strategy. EU engagement requires first and foremost a united European approach to the Libya crisis; therefore, European member states should overcome their divergent foreign policy stances towards Libya's transition. Rather than solely focusing on containing the risks, the EU needs to adopt a set of policies for two main policy ends: increasing its leverage in Libya, which would prioritise rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform and disarmament, and fiscal and monetary reform; and halting geopolitical rivalry which risks military escalation and complicating the political solution to the Libyan crisis. To meet these ends, engaging a cooperative relationship with mutual benefit between Europe and Turkey as well as other regional countries such as Egypt to help Europe enhancing its stabilising role in Libya.

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