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Biden's Libya Policy

US government relies on diplomacy and multilateralism in Libya

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Ten years after the start of upheavals in Libya, recent developments provide hope for a stabilization of the situation. Since October 2020, the guns have been silent in the civil war-torn North African country. And since February 2021, for the first time in almost seven years, the country has been ruled by an interim "Government of National Unity", GNU. In the first hundred days of the Biden administration, a change of course in US foreign policy towards Libya has become visible. While the previous US government pursued a very passive and sometimes questionable Libya policy, the Biden Administration relies on the power of diplomacy and the cooperation with traditional partners like Germany. The promising multilateral approach seems to be back.

Where does Libya stand today?

While, ten years after the start of the so-called "Arab spring", Libya is still going through a period of upheaval, recent developments cautiously suggest a stabilization of the situation. Just like many other countries in the region, Libya was caught off guard by the forceful protests of its citizens in 2011, and the regime of long-time ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi was toppled. In the subsequent years, the turmoil in the country did not subside. Instead, it turned into the theater of a geopolitical proxy conflict between international actors. The US remained a rather passive player since 2014.

Since the Libyan House of Representatives had split up into two chambers following the last parliamentary elections in 2014 and had gone on to operate as a divided body, based in the capital Tripoli and the Eastern Libyan city of Tobruk, the country was, in institutional terms, de facto divided into two factions. Brokered by the United Nations (UN), an attempt was made in Skhirat, Morocco, in December 2015, to form a "Government of National Accord", GNA. This attempt failed, which set off an escalating conflict between the GNA, which has been led by the internationally recognized Prime Minister Fayez Sarradj since 2016, and the self-professed "Libyan

National Arab Army", LNA, led by Khalifa Haftar. Haftar, who had lived in exile in the US until 2011 and has styled himself as a champion of the fight against Islamists in Libya, has since acted as the protector of the breakaway parliamentary body in Tobruk. In 2019, supported by Russian mercenaries, by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), he tried to capture Tripoli, overthrow the GNA and thereby decide the conflict militarily. While the GNA was able, thanks to support provided by Turkey and Qatar, to push back Haftar's forces successfully, another military escalation was looming, including possible regional implications.

Alarmed by these scenarios, the international community intensified its diplomatic efforts to prevent further military escalation in Libya. These efforts culminated in the Libya Conference held in Berlin on January 19, 2020, at the invitation of Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and in coordination with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Among the conference participants were Russia, Turkey, France and the US. The key results of the conference's final document, spelled out in 55 points, included an assertion to observe a ceasefire between the GNA and LNA, the implementation of the UN-initiated arms

embargo, returning to the political process as well as ending all hostilities.¹

Although there have been setbacks since the Berlin Libya Conference and there is still no compliance with the UN arms embargo, among other things, progress has been achieved on numerous counts. On October 23, 2020, the parties to the conflict came to an agreement on a ceasefire which has held until today. While there are still up to 20.000 foreign mercenaries in Libya according to UN estimates, more and more reports have come out on the gradual withdrawal of mercenaries from Sudan, Chad, Syria and Russia.

The political dialogue process, initiated since November 2020 by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), paved the way for the announcement that parliamentary and presidential elections will be held on December 24, 2021, the 70th anniversary of Libya's independence. This development is due in part to the personal commitment of the UN Special Envoy for Libya, the former US diplomat Stephanie Williams, who held that position until February 2021.²

On February 5, 2021, the *Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF)*, which includes 75 Libyans selected by UNSMIL, finally elected a three-member Presidential Council, headed by Mohamed al-Menfi, and a Prime Minister leading the Government of National Unity, GNU, Abdulhamid Dabeiba, a businessman from the city of Misrata. The main job of this interim government is to unify the institutionally divided country and to prepare the parliamentary and Presidential elections in December. There are more and more critical voices, however, accusing Dabeiba of having used bribes within the LPDF to ensure his election and of putting

together a government that is far too large, including, as it does, no less than 33 ministers. The interim government's almost 22 billion-dollar-budget is being criticized as outsized.³

Indeed, it does not look like the GNU government has made organizing the December elections the top priority in this country battered by civil wars, given its ambitious program for fighting Covid-19, eliminating the nationwide electricity problems and rebuilding the infrastructure. Also, the constitutional basis on which elections are supposed to be held is still an unresolved issue, which will have to be settled by July. Only then can preparations for the organization of nationwide elections go ahead. That is why many observers are already speculating that the election date could be postponed and that conflicts could flare up again at the end of the year, fueled by the failure of the LPDF to ensure that the GNU fulfills its main mission.

What is the US position?

Meanwhile, a number of high-ranking visitors have started flocking to the country. On March 15, the GNU government was sworn in by the parliament in Sirte, which had its first joint session in almost seven years. Only two days later, the Tunisian President Kais Saied became the first international head of state to visit the new Libyan government of national unity. He was followed by the foreign ministers of France, Italy and Germany, who arrived in late March for a joint visit. In early April, Mario Draghi even picked Libya to be the destination of his first trip abroad as the new Italian Prime Minister, thereby underlining the high geopolitical importance of the country.

¹ Berlin Libya Conference. Conference Conclusions. URL: Press Release No. 31/20 of 19 January 2020 on the Berlin Libya Conference (Conclusions) (bundesregierung.de) (08.01.2021).

² KAS Country Report January 2021 Libyans Schicksalsjahr. URL: [Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung - Libyans Schicksalsjahr \(kas.de\)](https://www.kas.de/KAS/Pages/Detail.aspx?id=13473) (14.04.2021).

³ Libya Crisis: The unity government's success hides serious dangers ahead. URL: [Libya crisis: The unity government's success hides serious dangers ahead | Middle East Eye](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-crisis-the-unity-government-s-success-hides-serious-dangers-ahead) (14.04.2021).

Stephanie Williams also pointed out recently that Libya is highly relevant for US geostrategic and national security interests.⁴

What role does Libya play in the foreign policy of the Biden administration? Should we expect a stronger US commitment in Libya? How has the US government defined its position since President Biden has come into office?

In 2011, the US was directly involved in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime by actively participating in the NATO mission to establish a no-fly zone over Libya, based on UN Resolution 1973. The air raids on Gaddafi's forces, carried out since March 19, 2011, were a key factor in his rapid demise and prevented further acts of violence against the civilian population, perpetrated by a regime that had come under pressure from rebel forces. While President Obama still had a positive view of the US engagement in Libya in 2012, he later admitted that there was no long-term US strategy for Libya after the military intervention.⁵ It seems that his then Vice-President Joe Biden was more skeptical about NATO's intervention in 2011, while Anthony Blinken, the then Deputy Secretary of State, supported it.⁶ As Secretary of State in the new Biden Administration, Blinken is confronted again with the Libya issue. Recently, he has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Libya's December elections for the US administration.

The Islamist attack on the US mission in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, and the killing of the then US ambassador J. Christopher Stevens as well as three other diplomatic

personnel left a lasting imprint on Libyan-American relations and was one factor in the decision to move the US embassy to Tunis in 2014. Currently, there are no plans to relocate the embassy back to Libya. This, however, seems to be the ultimate objective, as soon as overall security permits.⁷

US calls for elections in December

Although President Biden mentioned Yemen, but neither Syria nor Libya, in his first foreign policy speech, Secretary of State Blinken has repeatedly commented on Libya since he came into office. The US government welcomed the election of an interim government of national unity initiated by the LPDF and strongly emphasizes the need to stick to the election date of December 24, 2021. Blinken made reference to the October ceasefire agreement and the UN arms embargo against Libya and called on all international actors to pull out their fighters and mercenaries as soon as possible.⁸

In a telephone call with GNU Prime Minister Dabaiba on March 22, Blinken repeated these demands⁹, which had been expressed even more clearly by the National Security Adviser of the US government, Jake Sullivan, before. Sullivan congratulated the new interim government on behalf of President Biden and stated that the US government was prepared to hold those accountable who tried to torpedo the LPDF roadmap for preparing the December elections.¹⁰ This announcement from the White House, along with the call for a withdrawal of all foreign mercenaries, was interpreted by some

⁴ The Libya Allergy. URL: [The Libyan Intervention Left a Legacy of Regional Chaos \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/the-libyan-intervention-left-a-legacy-of-regional-chaos) (14.04.2021).

⁵ U.S. military interventions loom large 10 years after Obama attacked Libya. URL: [U.S. military interventions loom large 10 years after Obama attacked Libya \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military-interventions-loom-large-10-years-after-obama-attacked-libya) (13.04.2021).

⁶ US: What is President Biden's Libya Strategy? URL: [US: What is President Biden's Libya strategy? \(theafricareport.com\)](https://www.theafricareport.com/2021/04/13/us-what-is-president-biden-s-libya-strategy/) (13.04.2021).

⁷ Press Briefing U.S. State Department. URL: [Department Press Briefing - March 23, 2021 - United States Department of State](https://www.state.gov/department-press-briefing-march-23-2021) (13.04.2021).

⁸ Press Statement U.S. State Department. URL: [House of Representatives Vote on a Libyan Interim Government of National Unity - United States Department of State](https://www.state.gov/house-of-representatives-vote-on-a-libyan-interim-government-of-national-unity) (14.04.2021).

⁹ Press Statement U.S. State Department. URL: [Secretary Blinken's Call with Libyan Interim Prime Minister Dabaiba - United States Department of State](https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinken-s-call-with-libyan-interim-prime-minister-dabaiba) (14.04.2021).

¹⁰ Press Statement White House. URL: [Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Supporting Elections in Libya | The White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov/statement-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-supporting-elections-in-libya) (14.04.2021).

observers as a sign of a potentially closer involvement of the new US government in Libya. There was a noticeable shift towards a stronger US engagement in Libya.

While the US under President Trump had pursued a rather passive Libya policy – a questionable telephone call between Trump and the self-styled field marshal Haftar during his Tripoli offensive in April 2019 having attracted some attention¹¹ – the first statements coming out of Washington since Biden took office have suggested that the new US government is seeking a political solution to the conflict through dialogue and diplomatic efforts.

Since Biden came into office, the US government has repeatedly emphasized that UNSMIL must be strengthened and that a political solution of the conflict, based on the Berlin process, must be achieved. In late January, the US government, joined by the governments of France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom, paid tribute to the role of the LPDF¹² and, in mid-March, commented favorably on the swearing-in of the government.¹³ In this way, the new US government does not just underline its commitment to multilateralism and closes ranks with its traditional European partners, but it is stepping up the pressure on the interim government of national unity not to delay the preparations for elections, because the international community is watching.

Jonathan Winer, who was US Special Envoy for Libya between 2013 and 2016, recently summed up US interests in Libya as follows: the US needed to work even harder for the territorial integrity of Libya in order to prevent a potential splitting-up of the country into an Eastern and a Western part. Also, the fight against organized crime networks and human trafficking groups were equally important concerns as maintaining oil production in the resource-rich country. In the future, political stability in Libya could be a boost for closer economic cooperation in North Africa. In Winer's view, however, the key US interest lies in security policy, because extremist groups like IS were using Libya as a staging area and this could, in the long run, have a de-stabilizing effect not only on Libya, but on the entire Maghreb region, the Sahel area and Europe. This needed to be prevented.¹⁴

These recommendations are in line with the statements made by the new US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who defined three priorities for achieving lasting peace in Libya on March 24. According to her, the restoration of Libya's national unity, the fight against corruption, transparency of the political process as well as the withdrawal of all foreign fighters by the time when free and fair elections will be held in December are crucial steps for achieving lasting peace in the country.¹⁵ These are clear signals that the Biden Administration, unlike the previous administration, has defined a clear position on Libya by communicating specific expectations. Most importantly, there is a strong emphasis on an active role of the United Nations. The ultimate goal the Biden Administration is working towards is the achievement of an

¹¹ Trump praises Libyan general as his troops march on US backed government in Tripoli. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/19/politics/us-libya-praise-haftar/index.html> (14.04.2021).

¹² Press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. URL: [Gemeinsame Erklärung Deutschlands, Frankreichs, Italiens, des Vereinigten Königreichs und der Vereinigten Staaten zu Libyen - Auswärtiges Amt \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2021/03/210321-libya.html) (14.04.2021).

¹³ Press Statement U.S. State Department. URL: [Joint Statement by France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States on an Interim](https://www.state.gov/record/2021/04/13/20210413-us-statement-libya)

[Government of National Unity in Libya - United States Department of State](https://www.state.gov/record/2021/04/13/20210413-us-statement-libya) (14.04.2021).

¹⁴ Winer, Jonathan M. (2021): Libya. In: The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Policy Recommendations For a Sustainable Way Forward, pp. 1-64, here pp. 30-31. URL: [The Biden Administration and the Middle East - Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Way Forward.pdf \(mei.edu\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/the-biden-administration-and-the-middle-east-policy-recommendations-for-a-sustainable-way-forward) (13.04.2021).

¹⁵ Statement by U.S. Mission to the UN. URL: [Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on Libya | United States Mission to the United Nations \(usmission.gov\)](https://www.usmission.gov/record/2021/04/13/20210413-us-statement-libya) (13.04.2021).

inclusive political solution in Libya without the interference of external actors.

Analysis and outlook

Since Biden took office, representatives of the US government have spoken out on Libya more and more frequently. In their statements, they have emphasized that multilateralism needs to be strengthened and highlighted the role of the United Nations as well as traditional European partners like Germany. The Berlin Libya process is regarded as a valid foundation. Holding the scheduled parliamentary and Presidential elections on December 24, compliance with the UN arms embargo and the withdrawal of all foreign mercenaries are among the important priorities of US foreign policy towards Libya. The position of a US Special Envoy for Libya has been vacant since 2016, which suggests that the United States will not play a pro-active role in the future, either, but will probably focus on the diplomatic and international level for finding a political solution to the Libya conflict. Meanwhile, Russia and especially Turkey, keep jockeying for position in Libya. The coming months will show whether especially these two countries will contribute to an honoring of the arms embargo and the withdrawal of mercenaries or whether they will keep pursuing their sometimes conflicting self-interests. Should the December elections be postponed or delayed,

the US government could be prompted to become more involved in Libya as well, as it has announced it would.

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