

January 2021

country report

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean



Libya's fateful year

Where does Libya stand one year after the Berlin Libya Conference?

Thomas Volk

2020 Libya set an important course for achieving (security-relevant) political and economic progress towards a sustainable political solution to the conflict that has been ongoing since 2011. The Berlin Conference on Libya convened by Chancellor Merkel on 19 January 2020 was a significant contribution on that way. Parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled to take place in the North African country on 24 December 2021. The first weeks of this year will show whether this remains a realistic scenario. If the agreed deadline to withdraw all foreign fighters from Libya by 21 January is not met, Libya will once again start an uncertain and probably turbulent year.

Background

2021 will be crucial for the stability of Libya and thus Europe's direct neighbourhood in the southern Mediterranean. Ten years after the start of the uprisings on 17 February 2011 and the killing of long-term ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi on 20 October 2011, the country is still in an open transformation process and has recently revealed its political dysfunctionality. No parliamentary elections have been held since 2014 and violent internal conflicts have intensified since 2019. The country has also increasingly become the scene of a proxy conflict between regional and international players.

Since the parliamentary elections in 2014, the House of Representatives split into two chambers, with the capital Tripoli and the eastern Libyan city of Tobruk acting in a divided manner, the political fragmentation of the country has continued. With the mediation of the United Nations (UN), an attempt was made to form a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Skhirat in Morocco in December 2015. The strong influence of Islamist actors in the country at the time was seen as the right moment to unite the quarrelling parallel parliaments in Tobruk and Tripoli.

Five years later, we know that the attempt failed and that the conflict has intensified since Fayez Sarraj took office as GNA Prime Minister on 15 March 2016. The escalation of the conflict initially also had to do with the personal ambitions of the commander of the self-declared Libyan National Army (LNA), Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Haftar, who lived in exile in the USA until 2011 and styles himself as a champion against the influence of Islamist forces in Libya, aspires to authoritarian military rule for the country and has acted as the patron of the separated parliamentary chamber in Tobruk since 2014. He still does not recognise the internationally recognised GNA government and has been supported by Russian mercenaries, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in his military attempts to capture Tripoli and overthrow the Government of National Accord since 2019. The GNA, on the other hand, can rely mainly on Turkey and Qatar as supporters and was recently able to push back Haftar's and the LNA's influence thanks to a strong Turkish military offensive. Although Haftar lost influence in 2020, it remains to be seen in which direction Libya will develop in the long term.

Berlin Conference on Libya worked successfully

On 19 January 2020, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in consultation with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, invited government representatives from twelve countries to the Berlin Conference on Libya. The aim of the conference was to put an end to the violent clashes in Libya and to the external influence on the conflict. The invitation was accepted by high-ranking representatives from the USA, Russia, China, Great Britain, France, Italy, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Algeria and Congo. In addition, emissaries from the Arab League, the African Union, the United Nations and the European Union (EU) attended the meeting. The two main Libyan protagonists, GNA Prime Minister Sarraj and LNA Commander Haftar were also present - although they did not meet personally in Berlin.

The main outcomes of the 55-point final document of the conference were the affirmation of adherence to a ceasefire between the GNA and LNA, the enforcement of the UN arms embargo and the return to the political process, as well as an end to all fighting.¹

Despite numerous setbacks, the Berlin conference on Libya represents a milestone in international efforts to resolve the conflict in Libya. Without it, important progress such as the resumption of the political process since autumn 2020, the formal agreement on a ceasefire in October and the agreement on an election date for December would hardly have been possible. Progress was made in 2020 on the three essential and mutually dependent postulates of the conference, namely to reach a political solution, to achieve a ceasefire and to resolve economic blockages. However, the sustainability of these positive developments remains fragile and dependent on the decisions made during the coming weeks.

Ceasefire has held since October 2020

Following the Berlin Conference on Libya, disillusionment quickly set in, as the parties to the conflict initially did not adhere to the agreements. The LNA continued its military operations and was able to make considerable territorial gains until April 2020. In the process, the LNA received financial and military support from the UAE and Egypt. Supported by Turkish soldiers and Syrian mercenaries hired by Turkey, the GNA managed to make important strategic terrain gains and repel the LNA in a counter-offensive starting in May 2020. Due to these GNA territorial conquests, an intervention by Egypt on the side of the LNA seemed possible for a time. Since summer 2020, the two parties to the conflict have been facing each other on a front line along the cities of Sirte and Jufra in central Libya.

Alarmed by this potential for military escalation, diplomatic efforts to manage the conflict subsequently intensified. Egypt, Morocco and Algeria in particular tried to mediate within Libya, while Russia and Ankara started direct talks to avoid further escalation. At the same time, the UN Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL), which has been led by Ghassan Salamé's deputy Stephanie Williams since his resignation in March 2020, intensified its diplomatic efforts in the spirit of the Berlin Conference on Libya. All these developments, which could be seen as being partly disconnected from each other, finally led to the joint announcement by Fayeze Sarraj and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Aguila Saleh, on 21 August that they wanted to implement a permanent ceasefire. By the time, Haftar was already losing considerable political weight and was noticeably weakened in eastern Libya by Saleh as an influential mastermind.

The increased willingness to compromise finally led to a diplomatic breakthrough in Geneva on 23 October 2020 and the agreement of a lasting

¹ Berlin Libya Conference. Conclusions of the conference. URL: [Pressemitteilung Nummer 31/20 vom 19. Januar 2020 zur Berliner Libyen-Konferenz](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2020/01/19-berlin-libya-konferenz.html)

([Schlussfolgerungen](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2020/01/23-schlussfolgerungen.html)) ([bundesregierung.de](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2020/01/23-schlussfolgerungen.html)) 08/01/2021).

ceasefire. In addition to ending all violent confrontations, the parties agreed to withdraw all foreign soldiers, fighters and mercenaries within three months. The relevance of security sector reform was also noted.² The fact that the first prisoners were exchanged in December 2020 and the first days of 2021 can be seen as a positive move. At the end of December 2020, Egypt even sent a delegation to Tripoli for the first time in six years to meet with GNA ministers, among others. The first confidence-building measures thus seem to be bearing fruit.

The fragility of the agreement with regard to the withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign troops nevertheless became clear when the Turkish National Assembly confirmed its military support for the GNA on 22 December 2020 and decided to deploy soldiers in Libya for another 18 months from 2 January 2021.

Elections on 24 December 2021?

The October ceasefire agreement also allowed for the resumption of the political dialogue process. Both the ceasefire and the establishment of a Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) were achieved due to the efforts of Stephanie Williams and UNSMIL. From 9 to 15 November 2020, at UNSMIL's invitation, 75 selected Libyans, including women, youth representatives and influential figures from all three regions of the country, attended a face-to-face meeting in the Tunisian capital for political consultations. Although the establishment of this dialogue forum by itself is an important milestone towards a political solution to the conflict, it must also be noted that the LPDF so far has fallen short of the expectations associated with it. It is true that 24 December 2021, Libya's

Independence Day, was set as the date for the next parliamentary and presidential elections. But central questions remained unanswered due to significant differences among LPDF members. What should a new constitution for Libya look like and does it have to be put to a referendum before the election? How will the selection of the new three-member presidential council take place? Which candidate is suitable to unite the country as prime minister until election day and to prepare the election process transparently and with the acceptance by all sides? The majority of the panel only agreed that none of the political protagonists since 2014 should run in the 2021 election.

Of the original 12 proposals for possible electoral mechanisms, two were agreed upon after weeks of deliberation, but could not be voted on due to the boycott by 23 of the 75 LPDF members in mid-December. Stephanie Williams on 30 December 2020 spoke of a "crisis of confidence between key LPDF stakeholders" and convened two commissions of 18 LPDF members to work out a roadmap to the December 2021 elections to help resolve the deadlock.³

Much will depend on the agreement on which personalities should prepare the elections and on what basis they will take place. The fact that the selection of LPDF participants has already been criticised of lacking transparency is as unfavourable a precondition as the lack of compliance with the ceasefire agreement. On the other hand, the holding of local elections since October 2020 and most recently in eight municipalities from 4 to 6 January 2021 are positive signals, especially since the majority of the Libyan population trusts the local administration and local politicians.⁴

² Agreement for a complete and permanent ceasefire in Libya. URL: [ceasefire agreement between libyan parties english.pdf \(unmissions.org\)](https://www.unmissions.org/ceasefire-agreement-between-libyan-parties-english.pdf) (09/01/2021).

³ Statement of UN Special Representative Stephanie Williams. URL: [Near verbatim Remarks of ASRSG Stephanie Williams opening remarks during the virtual meeting of the LPDF on 30 December 2020 | UNSMIL \(unmissions.org\)](https://www.unmissions.org/near-verbatim-remarks-of-asrsg-stephanie-williams-opening-remarks-during-the-virtual-meeting-of-the-lpfd-on-30-december-2020) (09/01/2021).

⁴ Representative survey in Libya from November 2020, conducted on behalf of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Regional Programme Political Dialogue in the Southern Mediterranean. The results of the survey will be published at the end of January 2021. 55 per cent of respondents trust the local government somewhat, very much or completely; 60 per cent trust the local administration somewhat, very much or completely.

Oil-rich country with poor population

The resource-rich country's economic situation was also strained in 2020, causing nationwide protests in the shadow of the Covid 19 pandemic. In addition to rampant corruption in the country, power cuts lasting for hours, scarce cash, water and food supplies, as well as the restrictions of the health crisis led to unrest that caused the Prime Minister of Eastern Libya, al-Thani, and GNA Prime Minister Sarraj to declare their resignations in August. The latter, however, agreed at the end of October, at the request of the international community, to remain in office for the time being for the sake of continuity.

The months-long oil blockade by Haftar, which led to revenue losses of more than eight billion euros, has at least been resolved in the course of the political rapprochement since autumn 2020. However, Haftar retains a great deal of influence over the country's oil reserves and will probably know how to exploit them again for his own purposes, if political developments do not go his way. Nevertheless, it can be considered a success that on 16 December 2020, for the first time in five years, five of the seven board members of the Central Bank of Libya held a meeting. The board, which has been equally ideologically divided since 2014, decided to devalue the Libyan dinar and set a single exchange rate to the US dollar. The central bank meeting is another important step to further advance the country's integrity and institutional unity.

Moods in Libya

After years of conflict, the population above all longs for peace and stability. However, the Libyan society in eastern and western Libya cannot be considered a homogeneous unit. Trust in the current political leaders is decreasing.

At the end of 2020, more than half of Libyans perceived the country's economic situation as bad

or very bad, only a quarter rated the situation as positive. 55 percent of Libyans also perceive a deterioration in their personal economic situation, as compared with the previous year. At the same time, however, the population is optimistic and hopeful about the future. 63 percent of those surveyed expect the country's economic situation to improve in the coming years.⁵

Orientation and outlook

The Libyan conflict, which has become increasingly internationalised since the beginning of 2020, is facing a crossroads one year after the Berlin Conference on Libya. The ceasefire agreement of October 2020 and the setting of an election date for December 2021 by the Libyan Dialogue Forum are important advances in the conflict that has been deadlocked for years. At the same time, continued signs of defiance of the UN arms embargo and the culture of mistrust between Libyan protagonists, as well as the LPDF impasse, are worrying and highlight how fragile and uncertain any of these advances actually are. Furthermore, it remains to be seen who will now take on this complex task after the surprising withdrawal of the already nominated new UN Special Representative for Libya at the end of December 2020. Since Tunisia, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, will chair the Council in January, it could remind the parties to respect the UN arms embargo. A debate at the Security Council on the work of UNSMIL has already been scheduled for 28 January.

European states, especially Germany, France and Italy, should coordinate their Libya policy even more and develop a common position this year. While EU states were often divided in their Libya policy, Russia and Turkey created facts. In the meantime, both states have been able to position themselves as decisive players in Europe's immediate neighbourhood and are continuously expanding their geostrategic influence. Without

⁵ Ibid.

them, a solution to the Libyan conflict will not be possible.

The new Biden administration is unlikely to become a major player in the region in the foreseeable future due to domestic political priorities. This makes it all the more important for the EU and its member states to act decisively. Germany enjoys great trust in Libya and should continue to use the influence it has gained to bring about a lasting political solution to the conflict.

The regional dimension of the Libyan conflict is obvious. All North African states in one way or another contributed to the mediation attempts in Libya in 2020. Ten years after the beginning of the upheavals in many countries of the Arab world, Libya can show in 2021 whether it will join the ranks of continuing trouble spots or whether it will use its potential and open a new, democratic chapter in its history. 2021 will be Libya's fateful year.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Thomas Volk
Director, Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean Region
European and International Cooperation (EIZ)
www.kas.de/poldimed

thomas.volk@kas.de



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