



INSIDE LIBYA

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FOREWORD

The Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean (PoDiMed) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in cooperation with LIBYA DESK™ is delighted to continue our monthly reports on Libya for 2021. This format examines the most important political, economic and social developments of the previous month, which are of central importance for understanding the situation in Libya. The report is based on reliable Libyan sources and provides a summary and a contextualisation of developments in the wider Libyan context. The report is usually being published every first week of each month.

While much attention has been paid to the external and geopolitical dimensions of the situation in Libya, voices from within Libya are central to understanding local developments and the evolution of the Libyan conflict as well as its impact on the wider Mediterranean region. As an inclusive Libyan-led and Libyan-owned mediation with regards to the political, economic and military tracks are without alternative, these monthly reports emphasise the most important events within Libya and aim to give a better picture of what happens “Inside Libya”.

Based on existing KAS-PoDiMed formats such as the Libya Brief and the Libya Task Force, we consider it necessary to shed light on the dynamics within Libya and to emphasise the importance of continuing and facilitating a national dialogue process in the spirit of the UN-led Berlin process.

We hope that these monthly reports will give our readers a better picture of the dynamics of the ongoing Libyan conflict, its actors and multiple dimensions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.** The Government of National Unity (GNU) starts to face important governance challenges as its policy of appeasement backfires with growing popular dissent and roadblocks from key stakeholders.
- 2.** Following the meeting of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) Legal Committee in Tunis, disagreements over whether presidential elections should be direct or indirect took centre stage in political debates and are threatening to derail plans to hold elections on December 24.
- 3.** The Presidential Council is laying the groundwork to advance national reconciliation and consolidate the unity of the country. However, its efforts might be too muddled as rifts are already surfacing both within and outside the executive authority.
- 4.** The diplomatic outreach performed by Libya's new executive authority has displayed internal differences and multipolarity that could be exploited by foreign powers to pursue their national interests.
- 5.** The politicisation of the budget approval and persisting struggle for control over key economic and financial institutions continue to hurt governance and economic stability in Libya.
- 6.** Dabaiba has come to power with a logic of using economic development to bolster his political standing. However, doubt remains as to whether the situation is ripe for the PM's economic objectives in such a short period with a limited mandate.
- 7.** Although not completely stalled, the military track has not made much progress in April. The coastal road remains closed and there are no signs of foreign fighters departing.
- 8.** In terms of territorial control, the current government might face the same challenges as the Government of National Accord (GNA) as Khalifa Haftar reasserts his authority over large parts of the country.
- 9.** Some armed groups have managed to gain greater clout in western Libya since the new executive authority's formation.
- 10.** Tensions that characterised the pre-April 2019 momentum are increasingly palpable in Libya's current stage. The role of the Presidential Council and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) will be key in ensuring the past does not repeat itself.

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THE DEBATE OVER DIRECT OR INDIRECT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Following the meeting of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) Legal Committee in Tunis, disagreements over whether presidential elections should be direct or indirect took centre stage in political debates threatening to derail plans to hold elections on December 24.

As highlighted in the ninth edition of Inside Libya, the new team at the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is inching toward a more hands-on approach to implement the LPDF's roadmap and prevent partisan interests within national institutions from derailing the path toward elections. In April, the importance of the LPDF Legal Committee's role was reiterated by UNSMIL while its members met in Tunis to make proposals on the constitutional basis for elections. However, this meeting was met with criticism from several Libyan parties, who either contested the role given to the Legal Committee or blamed some of its members for pushing for indirect elections — which would scrap the highly anticipated presidential vote and empower legislative bodies such as the House of Representatives (HOR) and the High Council of State (HCS). Nevertheless, the UN Envoy Ján Kubiš has continued to support the Legal Committee and asked a final draft on its proposals to present to relevant actors, prime of which HOR Speaker Agila Saleh, who remains a difficult interlocutor to deal with but one whose support is crucial for guaranteeing elections.

Civil society has also been present in calling for timely and direct elections. The so-called “24 December Movement” continues to gain momentum and inspire various parts of Libya's society, including the youth who organised national conferences in several cities across the country to voice their support for elections. Through a resolution, the UN Security Council also enshrined December 24 as the election date and recognised July 1 as the deadline by which the electoral law should be presented to the High National Elections Commission (HNEC). The latter has also increased coordination with the Government of National Unity (GNU) so as to ensure greater funding, adequate security and more national awareness around elections. Nonetheless, there remains a lot of uncertainty regarding the HNEC's ability to organise elections, prime of which because its members are meant to be replaced soon by the parliamentary committee on sovereign positions — a reshuffle that could complicate the electoral body's work and be accompanied by political intrigue. Moreover, the lack of progress on the military track continues to raise concerns about the government's ability to hold safe and secure elections by the end of the year.

In spite of all the uncertainty, the political arena is already in campaigning mode. A number of figures have already presented their candidacy, namely former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha and businessman Arif al-Nayed, whilst others such as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi or Libyan National Army (LNA) Commander Khalifa Haftar are laying the groundwork for either participating in elections or at least weighing heavily on its results. Importantly, the Public Prosecution office has initiated a review process for those forcefully detained, a process that could lead to the acquittal of a number of political prisoners, including Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and open the way for many voices that have been marginalised over the last years. Additionally, there are concerns that PM Abdulhamid Dabaiba might not be fully committed to the holding of elections or that he expects to use his current position to become a serious contender in them. Overall, there is an increasing risk for the political environment to turn more conflictual as electoral stakes and personal ambitions get ahead of immediate governance needs.

CHALLENGES ON THE PATH TO NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

The Presidential Council is laying the groundwork to advance national reconciliation and consolidate the unity of the country. However, its efforts might be too muddled as rifts are already surfacing both within and outside the executive authority

Unifying state institutions and fostering national reconciliation are the top priorities for Libya. To make this happen, the PM has taken a hands-on approach through various grant initiatives highlighted later in this report, whilst pushing the inclusive view that he heads a government for all Libyans. Travelling to conflict-affected areas such as Tawergha, Tarhuna or south Tripoli has been a way for Dabaiba to demonstrate his commitment to healing Libya's wounds and offering funds for the reconstruction of war-hit areas as well as the return of the internally displaced. For instance, the Ministry of Housing launched a war rubble and mine clearance programme in south Tripoli and announced the construction of 1,000 housing units in Tawergha, one of Libya's worst hit cities in terms of displacement. More importantly, the Presidential Council (PC) also unveiled the High National Reconciliation Commission, which will be tasked with identifying citizens' needs and coordinating responses with relevant government authorities so as to diminish grievances and foster social harmony.

On the topic of state unification, the PM stated that the process was “80% complete” with most institutions more or less under the GNU’s control. However, this is where political statements diverge from reality on the ground. The PM might have enjoyed a smooth transition to power but is increasingly coming to terms with a political environment that remains divided and hostile. This division already exists in the executive authority’s set-up as there is neither a clear division of tasks between the PC/GNU, nor a definitive hierarchy between the six officials heading the two bodies. As a result, the executive authority might turn into islands of bureaucracy where coordination is difficult to strike and each personality manages to carve their own fiefdoms and patronage networks. In fact, there are already hints that the eastern Deputy PM, Hussein al-Qatrani, enjoys a great deal of independence as he is posted in Benghazi and must deal with dynamics that are difficult to grasp from Tripoli. Moreover, the political scene rewards those who are ready to look past procedural requirements and push their own agenda regardless of their mandate, something which has slowed down the PC’s work as it is the only authority that is in the process of drawing clear governing bylaws and structures for itself.

There is also the growing risk that Dabaiba’s strategy of reaching out and trying to win everyone over might backfire sooner rather than later. In contrast to Mohamed al-Menfi who visited Murzuq and can travel back to his native Cyrenaica, the PM has not yet been able to travel to key cities in southern and eastern Libya as it remains unclear whether he would be welcome there. As explained later in this report, Dabaiba’s botched visit to Benghazi has demonstrated that the fault lines that led to the 4 April 2019 assault on Tripoli by the Libyan National Army (LNA) are still vivid and that unity remains relative in Libya. Even so, traditional spoilers such as the LNA are not the only roadblock to the GNU being able to govern Libya as various factions, including many MPs, have raised their discontent with Dabaiba’s appointment of deputy ministers. This may well indicate that claims for greater regional or factional representation will rise over the next months as the PM inevitably disappoints some parties and becomes the target of political machinations.

LIBYA USES DIPLOMACY AS A BALANCING ACT

The diplomatic outreach performed by Libya's new executive authority has displayed internal differences and multipolarity that could be exploited by foreign powers to pursue their national interests.

The establishment of Libya's new executive authority has somehow erased the Libya fatigue experienced by foreign diplomatic corps. In fact, major countries involved in the Libyan file have been quick to unroll the red carpet for the North African country's new leaders and have sought to lay the groundwork for a stable relationship based on economic and security interests. In this context, both the PC and GNU are given the opportunity to put on a balancing act to solidify Libya's stabilisation and foster harmony between the various foreign powers. However, how this is to be done and by whom has already led to several disagreements between officials, which could harm the country's foreign policy if left unchecked.

There is indeed a multipolarity in how foreign policy is conducted in Libya. The division of labour between important officials might be an appropriate way to deal with urgent diplomatic matters, however, in the Libyan context, it is also prone to creating miscoordination and disagreements. For instance, Dabaiba's diplomatic travels to the Gulf, Turkey and Russia have all been watched with caution domestically as many Libyans observed that external representation should only be carried out by the President of the PC while the PM should cater to domestic needs. This confusion around each official's mandate was made noticeable on at least two diplomatic events this month: first, when the PM went to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with a delegation mostly of family members to cultivate informal channels with Abu Dhabi. The second relates to the divergent views between the PC and the GNU regarding international agreements. While Mohamed al-Menfi has clearly stated that the PC was not entitled to signing international agreements, particularly when asked about maritime demarcation with Greece, the PM has shown no restraint in signing international agreements and taking engagements that might fall out of a transitional government's mandate.

The multipolar nature of foreign policy is nothing new in Libya but its persistence points to the executive authority's limits as the PC and the GNU are not the only Libyan actors to weigh on the international scene. In fact, many personalities outside the formal confines of the executive authority continue to be influential interlocutors for foreign powers, especially in eastern Libya where actors like Khalifa Haftar or Agila Saleh maintain their fight for political relevance and enjoy direct contact with foreign capitals. Albeit ne-

cessary on a pragmatic level, diplomatic contacts with semi-official actors have the potential to backfire by hurting national reconciliation as each of these interlocutors have their own agenda and seek to empower themselves by championing a particular foreign power's interest. For instance, Greek FM Nikos Dendias' visit to Benghazi – where he met Agila Saleh and Deputy PM Hussein al-Qatrani, while al-Menfi was in Athens – demonstrates how foreign capitals continue to search for links with actors sharing their interests on important international affairs. In fact, issues like Turkey's maritime MoU and military presence continue to fragment Libyan politics and lead to contradicting official statements as observed with the High Council of State's Head Khaled al-Mishri rejecting FM Najla al-Mangoush's claim that Turkish withdrawal was on the table.

Overall, in spite of all of its diplomatic efforts, Libya's executive authority is walking a thin line. Although it has sought to assuage the fears of each and every major stakeholder involved, the country's executive authority cannot have the same level of relations with all and needs to prioritise those willing to walk the talk. For now, Italy, Turkey and Egypt seem to have been identified by the PM as primary partners in Libya's reconstruction and stabilisation with large ministerial delegations discussing or signing several MoUs in April whilst other powers like Russia and the UAE have only given pledges to boost relations. The success of Libyan foreign policy will mainly depend on progress made in terms of Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement and how it could lead to an understanding on demilitarisation in the country. Italy, which just opened its consulate in Benghazi, could also play a major part in engaging Libya on behalf of Europe as its strong economic diplomacy is rewarded by Tripoli and its new PM Mario Draghi vies for intra-European unity over the Libyan file.

BUDGET APPROVAL IS DELAYED AMIDST POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC FINANCES

The politicisation of the budget approval and persisting struggle for control over key economic and financial institutions continue to hurt governance and economic stability in Libya.

In a country where the vast majority of gross domestic product comes from public spending, budget planification and approval is central to the overall economy and the quality of governance. Due to prolonged political divisions, Libya has been unable to function with a ratified budget since 2014 but this year has brought the possibility of having a unified budget passed by the HOR and putting the government in control of disbursement, instead of the

CBL applying its own discretionary rule. However, the April 19 parliamentary session in Tobruk did not lead to the ratification of the 2021 unified draft budget. Instead, the 96bn LYD (€17.7bn) budget proposed by the GNU was rejected by lawmakers for both partisan and technical reasons, thus raising concerns that the PM might not be able to fulfil his promises to the public or keep the many sides he has coaxed happy.

Technically, the draft budget had inaccuracies and violated parts of the Financial System Law by giving too much discretionary power to the government. As the largest in recent history, the draft budget was therefore rejected by lawmakers whose recommendations call for tighter expenditure so as not to exacerbate inflation and to ensure that budget items do not exceed the GNU's mandate. The latter point is also political as it pertains to fears that a large budget would substantially empower Dabaiba by allowing him to use public funds to benefit foreign or domestic partners and maintain a grip on power. Additionally, the role of Agila Saleh must not be overlooked in this matter since he has tried using parliamentary approval as a bargaining chip to gain concessions from the new government. For most of April, Saleh tied the issue of sovereign positions to the budget approval by requesting that his newly formed parliamentary committee first nominates qualified candidates before the HOR can vote on the budget. By the final week of April, this committee shared a long list of nominees for key sovereign positions, in which the long-time CBL Governor Sadiq al-Kabir has not been included.

For long, the CBL has been blamed for the non-liquidation of past budgets and the non-payment of allowances to some public employees. In April, this issue resurfaced with great tremors as NOC subsidiaries Sirte Oil Company (SOC) and Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGOCO) announced they were cutting down on oil production as a result of accumulated debt as well as their inability to access 2020 funds to buy spare parts and repair infrastructure. This led the NOC to declare force majeure at the port of Hariga on 19 April and call on the Attorney General to hold accountable those obstructing its operations – a clear criticism of the CBL, which failed to liquidate 1bn LYD (€185m) worth of oil-related financial arrangements agreed upon in November 2020. Following the output loss of 280,000 bpd, the Ministry of Oil announced the transfer of part of the oil-related financial arrangement while the NOC lifted its force majeure on April 26 following its victory in the standoff. This episode not only displayed the continued rivalry between Libya's financial powerhouses, but also the Ministry of Oil's attempt at gaining control of the NOC with the latter retaliating with tight coordination with its subsidiaries to use oil as a means to get its dues. Overall, the success of the GNU may very well rest on how the triumvirate of the CBL, Ministry of Oil and NOC manage to work together and prevent deep-rooted rivalries

from impacting revenues and state expenditure. The next challenge in this relationship will be the leadership change at the CBL and will demonstrate whether Libya's institutional landscape can go beyond personal ambitions and political competition.

WHY THE GNU'S ECONOMIC AMBITIONS MIGHT CLASH WITH POLITICAL REALITIES ON THE GROUND

Dabaiba has come to power with a logic of using economic development to bolster his political standing. However, doubt remains as to whether the situation is ripe for the PM's economic objectives in such a short period and with a limited mandate.

From MoUs signed with foreign partners to large capital spending included in the draft budget, the GNU has signalled it wants to offer welfare and development to the population. Its general messaging has been that Libya is back to business and that the government is there to improve Libyans' livelihoods with several initiatives. For instance, the PM instructed the Finance Ministry to pay family grants stipulated in Law 27/2013, which covers minors as well as women without income, and confirmed that public salaries would be increased per Law 12/2013 – a highly expected move considering the Libyan Dinar's devaluation. According to the GNU spokesman, 107,000 vulnerable families were given a Ramadan grant whilst the Economy Ministry called on shopkeepers to decrease basic commodities' prices for the holy month. Serious discussions were held with foreign partners so as to revive stalled infrastructure projects such as Tripoli's International Airport and the coastal highway, or even sign off new projects like power plants and a mall with a large Turkish contractor. The government also brought in 400,000 Covid-19 doses, still far below the 1 million doses expected by mid-April, and started a nationwide vaccination programme.

Likewise, ministries have envisaged administrative and structural reforms or promised new initiatives in the field of e-governance. For example, the Foreign Ministry – which has been perceived as a retirement plan for many politicians – emphasized its 48 months term-limit for diplomats would inevitably lead to the replacement of ambassadors outlasting their post, while relevant ministers discussed a potential yet highly unlikely fuel subsidy reform or at least better monitoring of fuel distribution to tackle the problem of smuggling. E-governance initiatives such as 'Hakomitna', an interactive electronic platform for people-to-government communication, in addition to an online platform listing public projects have also been presented in a

signal that the state recognises calls for higher transparency and accountability. On the financial level, the liquidity crisis has also slightly subsided with the CBL loaning 5bn LYD (€925m) to commercial banks and pressuring them to raise withdrawal ceilings. There have also been increased calls for the reestablishment of the Libyan Stock Exchange, the lifting of trade restrictions on selling foreign currency to SMEs or the opening of bank clearing nationally – policies that could help in solving the liquidity crisis and black-market foreign exchange rate.

However, the sheer ambition behind many of the GNU's economic initiatives risk clashing with political realities and put the PM in an awkward position. In fact, there is still not enough clarity as to what the government should realistically seek to achieve considering its limited mandate and there are already signs that it might struggle with the most pressing issues for the country – partly because of the controversy over the budget approval. For instance, there remains a high chance that the power deficit could reach around 2GW in the summer despite an emergency fund of 977m LYD (€180m) allocated to the General Electric Company of Libya (GECOL). As highlighted in the ninth edition of Inside Libya, the peaceful coming into power of the GNU has been based on the various promises made by the PM. The more these promises are left unfulfilled, the more cracks in Libya's political landscape are likely to emerge with factions forcefully requesting their share of the pie. In this context, Libya is not yet in a state to take on long-term reforms that could boost diversification, support the private sector and create an economy more resilient to price fluctuations.

MILITARY TRACK REMAINS BEHIND SCHEDULE

Although not stalled, the military track has not reached much progress with the coastal road still being closed and no sign of foreign fighters departing.

At the end of March, Libya's new PM had announced that the coastal road would reopen shortly and much of the delay was ascribed to the time-consuming mine clearance programme around Sirte. By the end of April, however, the coastal road still remains closed and the reasons behind this delay are more problematic than just mine clearance taking a long time. In fact, there is strong opposition from the Sirte-Jufra Operations Room regarding the reopening of the road as its Commander Bayt al-Mal has requested that all Wagner mercenaries leave Libya and LNA forces return to Benghazi before allowing this to happen. This stance clashes directly with instructions given by Mohammed al-Haddad, the Government of National Accord-appointed

military chief of staff, who tasked the influential Hatteen brigade from Misrata to reopen the coastal road. As a result, the Joint Military Commission met in late April alongside President Mohamed al-Menfi and Head of UNSMIL Ján Kubiš to bring a solution to the problem and go over preliminary plans to deploy a unified force across Libya. The most important outcome of their meeting has been their readiness to expose those obstructing progress on the military track, namely the Sirte-Jufra Operations Room, and to consider international sanctions. The latter are becoming an increasingly likely tool when dealing with spoilers in Libya as the United Nations Security Council approved the dispatch of 60 monitoring personnel and renewed the Panel of Expert assisting the Sanctions Committee on Libya.

In regards to the presence of foreign mercenaries, travels to Ankara and Moscow may hint at the possibility that the executive authority is working behind the scenes to remove Turkish and Russian-backed foreign fighters from Libya. However, there is no indication that discussions on the matter were prioritised by the PM and the presence of al-Haddad in the delegation to Turkey also came as a reminder that military relations between Tripoli and Ankara will not ebb in the future. On another level, the month of April brought up serious concerns about mercenaries of African origin in Libya. On April 11, clashes at the Libya-Chad border were recorded as members of the Chadian Front for Change and Concord (FACT), an opposition movement, entered Chad from Libya – where many have served as mercenaries for the LNA, which had reportedly paid them in kind with weapons. What ensued was a week-long conflict in the northern Chadian region of Tibesti, where the just re-elected President Idriss Deby died of fatal wounds. This episode has not only raised the alarm as to how effectively the PC, which acts as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and the LNA, which is the de facto military power in southern Libya, can control the border. Equally, the instability caused in Chad has highlighted the dangerous spiralling crisis that could emerge from Libya and expand into the Sahel should the country fail to disarm the numerous mercenaries in its territory.

LNA WANTS TO MAINTAIN CONTROL OVER ITS GEOGRAPHY

In terms of territorial control, the current government might face the same fate as the Government of National Accord since Khalifa Haftar maintains a high profile in eastern Libya.

Despite rising violence in Benghazi and being challenged politically from many sides, Khalifa Haftar remains a figure to be reckoned with in Libya, especially considering the territorial control his forces maintain and the

looming elections and his potential candidacy. As anticipated in previous reports, the military official has revamped his public relations and sought to portray himself as an important arbiter of the current transitional process. Initial statements from the LNA have shown a conciliatory tone toward the new executive authority, pointing that its difficult tasks ahead would not warrant quick results. However, they also hinted that the LNA would monitor the work of the executive whilst continuing to act independently and expecting goodwill from the GNU. This conciliatory stance was quickly put to the test later this month as the PM was unable to land in Benghazi to attend a planned ministerial meeting on 26 April, his second botched attempt so far.

The incident was ruled out by the GNU's spokesman as a miscoordination issue, but it betrays several grievances on the part of the LNA in addition to a political environment that is not prone to rapprochement between Dabaiba and eastern political players. In fact, the PM's way of approaching the travel reflected many of the LNA's concerns regarding slow progress on the military track and the view that whoever rules from Tripoli remains under the control of rival armed groups. For instance, Dabaiba came with a large security detail composed of different western-based militia members who requested to be in control of the situation even though the Interior Ministry's affiliates in Benghazi had made prior arrangements. The situation had already been made tense due to some comments by Dabaiba being misinterpreted, particularly his mention that Benghazi would "return to Libya" — a comment that pro-LNA outlets claimed was an insult to the city and reflected the PM's goal of bringing back Shura Council fighters there as IDPs. Importantly, this event may have opened the way for a more confrontational relationship between the GNU and the LNA as the former can use the incident to claim that the LNA wants to keep Benghazi as its protectorate, while the latter can draw popular support by pushing the line that the GNU cannot be trusted with Libya's national interest. In this context, it is difficult to see how concessions such as the appointment of LNA-affiliates as ministerial deputies could tone down the rivalry since the stakes are going to grow as the country approaches election date.

In fact, Haftar knows that the political chessboard will once again be redrawn in 2022 and that he could gain a larger piece of the pie then, either directly as a candidate or indirectly by supporting a major contender and bolstering his own position as Libya's prime military official. In this view, Haftar already appeared several times in al-Rajma alongside a vast array of officers, continued to receive tribal representatives from various parts of Libya and also took the commitment of building houses, hospitals and funding tuition fees for families of martyrs — promises that are either going

to push him to pressure the GNU for funding or to gain a greater control over eastern Libya's political economy. Haftar also continues to strengthen a mutually beneficial relationship with Cairo and has received implicit signs of recognition from Washington as the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Joey Hood, pointed to Haftar's potentially useful anti-terror role in the region.

A NEW SECURITY HIERARCHY EMERGES IN WESTERN LIBYA

Some armed groups have managed to gain greater clout in western Libya since the new executive authority's formation.

Currently, there have been no serious initiatives toward Security Sector Reform (SSR) on the part of the GNU. Instead, the government seems to be inheriting past security arrangements and allows powerful armed groups to weigh in on important matters. In this context, the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), particularly its elite Brigade 444, has continued to increase its clout that stems from its earlier alliance with former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha. In fact, the SDF has continued to carry out what could be perceived as state duties — often in ways that directly benefits its standing in Tripoli and beyond. In April, the Brigade 444 launched a campaign in which it stormed several militia dens to allegedly return such properties to their rightful owners, while in the process dislodging its competitors. Another episode showcasing the SDF's growing clout took place in early April, when it arrested the head of Zwara's Security Directorate with a warrant from the Public Prosecutor's office. There again, the SDF was made to benefit from the situation since the arrest warrant was meant to recoup funds intercepted by Zwara's Security Directorate which belonged to a relative of the SDF's commander. This standoff did not however prevent an escalation as militiamen from Zwara sought in vain to storm Mellitah's oil complex to expedite the release of their security director. Another interesting development has been the release of Abulrahman Milad, aka "al-Bidja", who had been charged with migrant trafficking. This release was made as a result of strong lobbying efforts from the prisoner's hometown of Zawiyah, which has gradually gained greater political and military power in western Libya. This signals that armed groups and criminals are still able to wield considerable influence over state institutions.

CONCLUSION & FORECASTS

Developments over the past month have reset the political chessboard in Libya to a configuration that resembles dynamics in the period building up to 4 April 2019, when the LNA launched its offensive on Tripoli. The one variant today is that Libya now has a Presidential Council that, for the most part, remains neutral and has shown potential for navigating the country's political divisions.

Necessary support must be given to the PC to ensure it acts as the national mediator, mitigator and problem-solver so that conflicts do not erupt. The PC's key duties as outlined by the LPDF's political roadmap are to oversee key portfolios such as national reconciliation, act as Supreme Commander of the armed forces, and handle foreign policy in coordination with the Minister of Foreign Affairs. As such, with the right support, the Presidential Council could play an integral role in maintaining the current ceasefire, supporting the unification of the military through the 5+5 Joint Military Commission, launching a national reconciliation process and ensuring that the government stays within the political roadmap set by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum to achieve elections on December 24. Likewise, it could play the role of mediator between Libya's key national institutions and stakeholders.

Elections have been enshrined within the latest UNSC Resolution on Libya, along with a deadline for the HOR to prepare an electoral law by July 1. So far, no progress has been made to ensure either deadlines are met. Libya not holding elections on December 24 would be extremely dangerous as it would plunge the country into another legitimacy crisis given that the GNU's mandate expires on election day, ultimately bringing Libya back to where it was prior to the LPDF and allowing spoilers to fill the vacuum through military means. It is up to UNSMIL and the international community to ensure that elections are met by applying the necessary pressure on the GNU and HOR. Going forward, splits over elections on 24 December will become more pronounced among Libyan and foreign stakeholders alike. Pro-status quo actors such as the House of Representatives, the Higher State Council, and the Government of National Unity will try to stall progress towards elections with the likely support of foreign actors who fear elections may impact their current influence and interests on the ground. At the same time, we will see civil actors, organisations and political actors vying to compete in the elections begin doubling down in their efforts to ensure elections do take place. The latter will however be at a great disadvantage considering the authority and power enjoyed by the pro-status quo actors along with the lack of commensurate foreign support.

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