

October 2026

Libya Brief| no. 15



Two Paths to a Political Settlement in Libya: Assessing the UN Roadmap and the Boulos Approach

What kind of political settlement could move Libya beyond its prolonged transitional order, and do the emerging UN and US-backed tracks offer viable and sufficiently legitimate paths to a durable settlement while limiting the risk of renewed conflict?

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Executive Summary:

Six years after the October 2020 ceasefire, Libya remains caught between a ceasefire that has largely held and a political settlement that has yet to be achieved. The failure of the 2021 elections left a prolonged transitional order marked by rival executives, divided security structures, parallel public spending and competition over oil revenues. Two tracks now seek to break the impasse, with different logics.

The UN Roadmap, presented by SRSF Hanna Tetteh in August 2025, combines negotiations among key institutional actors with broader societal participation. The Structured Dialogue (December 2025–June 2026) brought together 120 Libyans and produced more than 525 recommendations. On 30 August 2026, the Smaller Convening (4+4) agreed on a framework for elections within 24 months under a unified executive. Disputes over the HNEC chair, objections from the High Council of State and political parties, and divisions within the House of Representatives show, however, that agreement among representatives does not settle questions of institutional authority.

The Boulos approach is built on a bargain between the Dabaiba and Haftar camps, reportedly centred on a new unified executive accompanied by security and economic reunification. It engages actors best placed to obstruct change, but its terms remain opaque, its base is narrow and its relationship to broader political legitimacy remains unclear. The April 2026 unified budget has not yet translated into effective fiscal unification.

Key Findings

- The two approaches differ more in sequencing, scope and leverage than in ultimate objectives.
- The unified executive is the clearest point of convergence, but its value depends on its mandate, duration, oversight and link to elections.
- Actors in both camps who stand to lose from a new arrangement are a central risk for implementation.
- A durable settlement requires both the consent of those able to block change and sufficient legitimacy and inclusion.

Over the next 12–24 months, four trajectories are conceivable: convergence of the two tracks; power-sharing without broader transformation; parallel tracks and managed deadlock; and a reshaping of the political process. Renewed localised or wider conflict remain a possible consequence if arrangements fail. Decisive indicators are coordination between UNSMIL and the US track, a time-bound executive mandate, implementation of fiscal and military integration, concrete electoral preparations, the reaction of potential losers, and functioning oversight mechanisms. European engagement, often shaped by migration and energy concerns and pursued through parallel bilateral channels, risks weakening a coherent European position on Libya. Whether European actors align more consistently behind the UN roadmap or continue to prioritise bilateral interests will affect how much leverage the EU can bring to bear on the emerging political process.

Introduction

The 2020 ceasefire brought an end to the large-scale fighting that had divided Libya, but it did not resolve the political, institutional and economic issues underlying the conflict. Instead, it largely froze them in place. Six years on, Libya therefore remains caught between a ceasefire that has largely held and a political settlement that has yet to be achieved.

The failure of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) to lead the country to elections in 2021 illustrated the difficulty of moving from a cessation of hostilities to a durable political settlement. Established under UN auspices, the LPDF sought to provide a time-bound transitional framework culminating in presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2021. When elections did not take place, Libya entered a new phase of institutional paralysis, demonstrating that a political roadmap and

commitment to elections are not, in themselves, sufficient to overcome the incentives and capacity of powerful actors to preserve the existing power arrangements.

The consequences of this failure extend beyond political legitimacy. Institutional fragmentation has further weakened governance and oversight, while parallel systems of administration and public expenditure have placed immense pressure on public finances. The security landscape likewise remains divided, with rival military structures exercising significant autonomy and foreign actors maintaining a presence in the country. Together, these developments have contributed to growing public frustration, already fueled by a dramatic deterioration of the socio-economic situation, and reinforced demands for elections capable of renewing Libya's political institutions.

Against this backdrop, two distinct but parallel tracks are now seeking to move Libya beyond the political impasse. The first is a new iteration of the process led by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which has sought to build a broad political settlement through inclusive dialogue, institutional unification and a renewed pathway towards national elections. Following the failure of the LPDF, the UN process has placed greater emphasis on addressing the political and institutional obstacles surrounding the electoral process. This rationale has been central to the Roadmap presented by UN-Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Hanna Tetteh following her appointment in January 2025. The second track is a U.S.-steered initiative associated with Massad Boulos, President Trump's Senior Adviser for Arab and African Affairs, centred on reaching an agreement among Libya's principal political and military powerholders. Its underlying logic is that a political bargain among the country's major players could facilitate institutional, economic and security reunification and provide the basis for a more stable political order.

The emergence of these two approaches raises a fundamental question about how Libya can move from a frozen conflict to a durable political settlement. The issue is not simply whether either track can produce a unified executive. A government that brings rival institutions formally under one authority may still fail to resolve the underlying mechanisms through which political, economic and military power is distributed and contested. Conversely, a process designed to maximise political legitimacy and societal guarantees may struggle to secure the agreement of actors with the capacity to obstruct or resist it. The central challenge is therefore to reconcile the political realism required to secure agreement among powerful actors with the legitimacy required for a settlement to endure.

This brief first examines the UN Roadmap and the Boulos Initiative, considering their respective approaches to political legitimacy, institutional reunification, security, economic governance and the prospects for a durable settlement. It then considers what these differences mean in practice: whether the two approaches address complementary parts of the same settlement problem, whether their sequencing can be reconciled, and under what conditions elements of the two could converge. Finally, it examines the potential trajectories that could emerge over the next 12–24 months, including convergence between the two tracks, a power-sharing arrangement without broader political transformation, continued parallel processes and managed deadlock, or a restructuring of the political process in response to changing political, economic or security conditions. The central question throughout is whether Libya can secure both the agreement of actors capable of obstructing change and the political legitimacy, institutional coherence and accountability required to sustain a settlement beyond the current transitional order.

In addition to academic and policy research, official publications and media reporting, the analysis draws on a dozen semi-structured interviews with Libyan and international stakeholders, including political and institutional actors, civil society representatives, academics and diplomatic interlocutors, conducted between June and October 2026, in person and/or remotely. Interviews were conducted on a not-for-

attribution basis. Interviewees are therefore not identified by name, and their views are referred to in generic terms where they are used in the analysis.

1. From ceasefire to continuing political impasse

Libya's present political and security configuration has its roots in the October 2020 ceasefire, which brought an end to the large-scale fighting between the forces of Khalifa Haftar, supported by Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and forces fighting under the umbrella of the Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by Türkiye.¹

The agreement was more than a cessation of hostilities: it also envisaged the withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries and ultimately the unification of Libya's security institutions. While the ceasefire has largely prevented a return to large-scale east-west warfare, key elements of the agreement, including the withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries and progress towards security sector unification, remain incomplete, while localised armed confrontations have continued.² The ceasefire was followed by the UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), which in early 2021 produced an interim executive authority and a roadmap towards presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for December that year.³ The elections did not take place because rival factions failed to agree on electoral rules, the constitutional basis and eligibility criteria for the presidency.⁴ What was intended to be a temporary political arrangement instead transformed into another prolonged transitional order. The country has remained divided between the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), headed by Abdulhamid Dabaiba and exercising authority over much of the west, and the Haftar-backed authorities that administer the east and much of the south. Alongside these competing centres of executive power sits the three-member Presidential Council, established through the 2021 LPDF and headed by Mohamed al-Menfi. The Council formally serves as Libya's collective head of state and supreme military authority,⁵ but the eastern military coalition does not recognise it as the country's ultimate military authority. Haftar's General Command continues to operate as a separate military structure. Foreign military involvement has also persisted: Russian-linked forces and personnel continue to control strategic military and energy infrastructure in eastern and southern Libya, while Türkiye maintains a military presence in the west.

Six years after the formal ceasefire, no political settlement capable of producing legitimate and functioning national institutions has been achieved. Instead, informal accommodations between the networks associated with the two ruling families (the Haftars in the east and the Dabaibas in the west) have helped sustain the existing political equilibrium, albeit with an evolving balance of power between the two camps that has increasingly favoured the Haftars.⁶

The persistence of competing authorities has allowed political and security actors to draw on public resources through a combination of formal institutions, informal arrangements and opaque spending mechanisms.⁷ In April 2026, the two camps reached an agreement on a unified state budget, facilitated by the US Special Adviser Boulos.⁸ So far, however, this political commitment has not translated into effective fiscal unification. Public finances therefore remain fragmented and poorly governed. The World

¹ https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/ceasefire_agreement_between_libyan_parties_english.pdf

² Hanna S. Tetteh, Remarks of the SRSG to the Security Council on the Situation in Libya, UNSMIL, April 22, 2026

³ https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/lpdf_-_roadmap_final_eng_revised_nov_2020_0.pdf

⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/middle-east-north-africa/libya/b085-steering-libya-past-another-perilous-crossroads>.

⁵ https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/lpdf_-_prerogatives_final_eng.pdf

⁶ <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/libyas-struggles-empower-clan/>

⁷ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Concerning Libya*, S/2026/224, 24 March 2026.

⁸ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/en/press-releases/unsmil-welcomes-the-signing-of-a-unified-spending-framework-urges-strong>

Bank has highlighted parallel budget structures, weak fiscal discipline and deficiencies in public financial management as major constraints on Libya's economic performance and service delivery.⁹ This is particularly consequential in a country whose economy remains overwhelmingly dependent on hydrocarbons: oil and gas accounted for approximately 65 per cent of GDP, 93 per cent of exports and 72 per cent of government revenues in 2024.¹⁰

The consequences of this divided system extend beyond the formal management of public finances. The division of political authority has also affected the management and distribution of oil revenues themselves. In the east, the emergence of Arkenu Oil Company illustrated how political and security networks have gained access to oil revenues outside the traditional state framework;¹¹ the UN Panel of Experts reported that Arkenu was indirectly controlled by individuals within the leadership circle of the eastern authorities and that revenues from its exports were directed outside the normal Central Bank of Libya channels.¹² Similar dynamics have existed in the west, although through different mechanisms, with UN investigations documenting the diversion of subsidised fuel through networks connected to armed and political actors operating around western state institutions.¹³ These cases point to a broader problem: competing centres of authority create incentives for actors to use control over state institutions and resource flows to secure economic rents. Economic reunification is consequently inseparable from the political bargain. A durable settlement must address not only who formally controls state institutions, but also who controls, distributes and benefits from Libya's national wealth.

The implications extend beyond the distribution of rents among political and economic elites. Weak oversight, competing spending priorities and the diversion of public resources constrain the state's ability to translate Libya's substantial oil revenues into reliable public services and improvements in living standards. Recent investment and reconstruction activity in Tripoli, Sirte, Benghazi and Derna illustrates the scale of available spending, but also raises questions about who determines development priorities and who ultimately benefits from them.¹⁴ Rising prices, pressure on household incomes, electricity shortages and deteriorating public services have consequently contributed to growing frustration with the political class. At the same time, more than 2.8 million of registered voters¹⁵ remain without an opportunity to participate in national presidential and parliamentary elections. Elections are therefore not simply a procedural issue. Within the broader political debate, they are widely presented as a means of renewing political legitimacy and bringing the prolonged transitional period to an end. The experience of the LPDF demonstrated that establishing an electoral roadmap was insufficient to overcome the incentives of entrenched political actors. The question today is therefore how to achieve a political agreement capable of replacing the fragile arrangements that have sustained the current equilibrium. It is against this background that the two approaches examined in this paper have gained importance.

⁹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/12/17/libya-sustained-strong-growth-requires-structural-change-to-improve-transparency-and-public-financial-management>.

¹⁰ World Bank. (2026). *Libya*. World Bank Group.

¹¹ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2024/914, 2024, para. 96.

¹² United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2024/914, 2024, para. 96. The Panel reported that Arkenu exported approximately 6 million barrels of crude oil between May and September 2024, with an estimated total value of US\$463 million, and determined that the company was indirectly controlled by Saddam Haftar.

¹³ United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2024/914, 2024, paras. 97–106. The Panel documented the diversion and smuggling of subsidised diesel by armed groups in western Libya, including networks operating in Tripoli and Zawiyah and exercising influence over relevant state institutions.

¹⁴ World Bank, *Libya Economic Monitor: Setting the Path Towards Accountability and Transparency in Public Financial Management*, 2025. The report highlights how institutional fragmentation, parallel budget structures, weak fiscal discipline and limited transparency constrain public financial management and the delivery of essential public services and investment.

¹⁵ High National Elections Commission (HNEC), "In the International Day of Democracy – We Renew Our Determination to Implement National Entitlements," 15 September 2022, reporting 2,879,334 registered voters.

The two approaches differ principally in their sequencing and underlying logic. The UN process seeks to build a broader political settlement through inclusive dialogue, institutional unification and ultimately national elections. The US-steered Boulos initiative, by contrast, starts from the premise that an agreement among Libya's principal powerholders—followed by the reunification of political, security and economic institutions—could provide a route out of the current impasse. The central question is therefore whether a broader political process should first establish the basis for institutional unification and renewed electoral legitimacy, or whether an initial elite bargain can create the political conditions for unifying the state and subsequently advancing towards elections.

2. Two parallel paths to settlement

2.1. The UN Roadmap Initiative

Why the UN changed its approach after the LPDF failure

The UN's current approach builds on the underlying logic of the LPDF rather than abandoning it, but it seeks to address some of its shortcomings. The experience of 2021 demonstrated the limits of attempting to move from an agreed political roadmap to elections without first securing sufficient agreement on the institutional and political conditions governing the transition, including the electoral laws and constitutional basis. It also highlighted both the incentives and capacity of entrenched actors to obstruct changes that could threaten their political, institutional and economic interests. This reinforced the importance of giving greater space to a broader range of Libyan societal actors in the political process, both to amplify their demands and to create greater public scrutiny and pressure on key powerholders.

This logic shaped the approach adopted by UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General Hanna Tetteh following her appointment in January 2025. The Roadmap she presented to the Security Council in August that year therefore combined two elements: continued efforts to secure agreement among the key institutional and political actors whose consent is necessary to implement any settlement and a broader, more inclusive political dialogue intended to develop consensus on key issues, build legitimacy and create pressure for change.¹⁶ This approach reflects an attempt to address the central weakness exposed by the 2021 process: the gap between agreeing on an electoral roadmap and securing the political and institutional conditions necessary to implement it.

The Advisory Committee: identifying options for the political agreements indispensable to the organisation of elections

The first major step undertaken by UNSMIL was the establishment, in February 2025, of a 20-member Advisory Committee of Libyan constitutional, legal, political and electoral experts.¹⁷ The Committee included representatives from different regions and cultural components and was tasked with identifying technically sound and politically implementable options for addressing the issues that had prevented the elections in 2021. Its creation reflected an effort to give Libyan actors a more central role in defining the transition's problems and possible solutions. This was particularly relevant to the question of legitimacy: a political process intended to produce a settlement for Libya would have greater

¹⁶ Hanna S. Tetteh, Remarks of the SRS to the Security Council, 21 August 2025, United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

¹⁷ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "UNSMIL announces the establishment of the Advisory Committee," 4 February 2025. The Committee comprised 20 Libyan personalities with expertise in legal, constitutional and electoral matters, and was tasked with developing technically sound and politically viable proposals to address outstanding issues preventing national elections.

credibility if its substantive options were informed by Libyan voices rather than formulated exclusively by international mediators.

The Committee submitted its final report to UNSMIL on 5 May 2025 and proposed four possible pathways for ending the transitional period.¹⁸ The first envisaged presidential and legislative elections within two years, once agreement had been reached on the legal status and financial independence of the High National Elections Commission (HNEC), amendments to the constitutional and electoral framework, and the establishment of a unified government. The second proposed electing a bicameral legislative council, with the Senate responsible for drafting and ratifying a constitution before subsequent elections. The third would prioritise adoption of a constitution before elections, including consideration of the 2017 constitutional draft. The fourth envisaged activating the dialogue mechanism contained in Article 64 of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) and establishing a constituent assembly.

Beyond these differences, the Committee identified a common set of political and institutional conditions to be addressed before any electoral pathway could realistically be implemented. It recommended reconstituting the Board of HNEC and guaranteeing its financial independence, amending the Constitutional Declaration, revising electoral laws to make them implementable, and establishing a new executive authority with a clearly defined mandate and timeframe. More importantly, it concluded that legislative and electoral reform alone would not resolve the underlying obstacles to elections. A comprehensive political settlement based on national consensus and inclusivity would be required to create the conditions for a successful electoral process.

The Committee's recommendations were consultative rather than binding, and the Committee itself was not a negotiating body capable of producing such a settlement. Their importance for UNSMIL therefore lay partly in providing a Libyan-generated basis for subsequent political engagement. The report gave the UN a set of proposals that could serve as a reference point in discussions with the principal political institutions, other political actors and wider societal constituencies. It also strengthened the UN's position with international stakeholders by providing a Libyan-designed and Libyan-owned basis for its approach.

The distinction between societal legitimacy and political authority was central to the challenge facing UNSMIL: make the two dimensions reinforce one another. The Advisory Committee did not itself establish a political settlement or replace negotiations among the principal powerholders. Rather, it helped translate the lessons of the previous transition into a framework in which broader Libyan participation and focused negotiations among key actors capable of determining implementation could proceed in parallel.

The common conditions identified across these pathways are analytically important because they suggest that the obstacles to elections are not confined to electoral legislation itself but extend to the wider institutional and political framework within which elections would take place.

UN-SRSG Tetteh's three-pillar Roadmap and the Structured Dialogue

Tetteh's Roadmap, presented to the UN Security Council in August 2025, built on this analysis. While elections remained a central objective, the roadmap placed them within a broader process intended to create the political and institutional conditions for holding them and securing acceptance of their outcome. The plan comprises three interconnected objectives: establishing a viable framework for

¹⁸ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Advisory Committee completes its mandate and submits final report to UNSMIL," 6 May 2025. The Committee submitted its final report on 5 May 2025, setting out options and recommendations for addressing contentious issues in Libya's electoral framework and ending the transitional period.

presidential and legislative elections; unifying Libya's divided institutions through the formation of a new unified government; and conducting a Structured Dialogue involving a broad range of Libyans to address governance, economic, security and reconciliation issues identified as the longer-term drivers of conflict.¹⁹ The three pillars are intended to reinforce one another, linking the immediate objective of ending the transitional period with the wider political settlement needed to sustain it.

The Structured Dialogue, launched in December 2025 and concluded in June 2026, provided the main mechanism for developing the broader societal dimension of this process. It brought together 120 Libyans from across the east, west and south, including representatives of political and societal constituencies, cultural components, women, youth and persons with disabilities. Its four tracks covered governance, the economy, security, and national reconciliation and human rights.²⁰ By extending participation beyond established political institutions and powerholders, the Dialogue sought to strengthen Libyan ownership of the process, broaden the legitimacy of an eventual settlement and identify the governance, economic and security issues that a political agreement would need to address. Its final report contained more than 525 recommendations.²¹ Its main contribution is therefore not direct decision-making, but the creation of a broader societal basis for identifying priorities and testing the legitimacy of these proposals with political and institutional actors.

The interviews conducted for this study generally underlined the perceived value of broader participation in negotiations²² while also highlighting concerns about the pace of the UN-led process.²³ These concerns are particularly significant given that Libya has spent more than a decade moving through successive transitional arrangements and internationally supported political processes. Diplomatic interlocutors have similarly identified the pace of the UN mediation as a constraint. While they recognise that a gradual approach may be necessary to build consensus, they also worry that prolonged political sequencing carries costs: institutional fragmentation, weak governance and competition over state resources continue while the political process seeks agreement on a comprehensive settlement. The longer the transition continues, the greater the pressure on the UN process to demonstrate tangible improvements in the functioning of the state.

The Structured Dialogue also has a clear structural limitation. Its recommendations are not binding, and its participants do not possess the institutional or coercive leverage required to implement them. Broader participation can strengthen the legitimacy of the political process and articulate demands for change, but the actors controlling Libya's political institutions, security structures and economic resources retain greater capacity to determine whether those demands are acted upon. The Dialogue should therefore be understood as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, negotiations with the principal powerholders. Its longer-term value will depend on whether its recommendations can be translated into concrete governance and institutional reforms and incorporated into a broader political settlement with credible mechanisms for monitoring implementation.

The 4+4 / Smaller Convening: facing the challenges of elite bargaining

In parallel to the Structured Dialogue, efforts to reach agreement between key powerholders continued under the leadership of UNSMIL. The Smaller Convening, also referred to as the "4+4", brought together

¹⁹ Hanna S. Tetteh, SRSF for Libya, "Remarks to the Security Council," 21 August 2025.

²⁰ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Structured Dialogue Concludes, Presents Final Recommendations for Libya's Political Process," 7 June 2026.

²¹ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/en/document-library/structured-dialogue-final-report>.

²² The inclusion of academics and political parties, in particular, was seen as a notable development, likely to strengthen the political relevance of the process.

²³ The gradual approach adopted by the UN translated into a lengthy process, perceived by some as too distant from the citizens' immediate needs and priorities.

four representatives from the eastern military's General Command and the House of Representatives (HoR), and four representatives from the High Council of State (HCS) and the GNU. Unlike the broader-based Structured Dialogue, the Smaller Convening relied on limited negotiations among political and military power centers, with the aim of addressing the points of blockage that had prevented progress on the electoral framework and moving the process toward implementation.²⁴

The agreement reached by the Smaller Convening on 30 August 2026 was significant in this regard. It established a framework for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held within a maximum period of 24 months, under a unified executive and unified national institutions.²⁵ It also addressed the reconstitution of the HNEC, electoral and legislative arrangements, candidacy requirements and mechanisms for implementation, including arrangements for endorsement by the HoR and HCS and provisions to address the possibility that the agreement may not be endorsed within the specified period.²⁶

The issues addressed – presidential eligibility, the status of military personnel and dual nationals, the composition of the HNEC Board and the electoral system for the next parliament – represented politically sensitive issues.²⁷ They went beyond the technical design of elections and raised broader issues of political participation, representation and institutional authority. The subsequent debate therefore centred not only on the substance of the proposed electoral arrangements, but also on who had the authority to negotiate, endorse and implement them.

This became apparent immediately after the agreement was signed. On the same day, Presidential Council President Mohamed Al-Menfi issued a decision reappointing Imad Al-Sayah as Chair of the HNEC,²⁸ while the Smaller Convening had recommended Dhou Al-Hamali for the position. The divergence highlighted the difficulty of translating a negotiated understanding into corresponding institutional arrangements, particularly where authority remained contested between existing institutions and the negotiating group.

The HCS had already questioned the basis of the Smaller Convening before the agreement was signed. On 26 August 2026, the Council challenged the process and its proposed outcomes, noting that it had not been represented in the meetings and calling for a clear legal and institutional basis.²⁹ After the agreement was signed, the Council continued to contest its institutional basis and later revoked the membership of two participants who had signed its outcomes without authorisation.³⁰ The dispute illustrated a recurring problem in elite bargaining: representatives may be able to reach an agreement, but their authority to make commitments on behalf of the institutions and constituencies they represent cannot be assumed.

The reactions of some political parties also aligned with those of the HCS, particularly regarding the electoral arrangements of the Smaller Convening. Specifically, 57 political parties and coalitions objected

²⁴ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "Statement Issued Following the First Meeting of the Smaller Convening," 29 April 2026.

²⁵ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2026-08/SC%20Agreement%20in%20ENG.pdf>

²⁶ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), "UNSMIL Welcomes the Signing of the Agreement by Participants in the Smaller Convening and the Next Steps Toward National Elections," 30 August 2026; see also Libya National Agency (LANA), report on the signing of the 4+4 agreement, 30 August 2026.

²⁷ The smaller Convening agreement signed in Tripoli and published by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), 30 August 2026.

²⁸ Presidential Decree No. 2 of 2026 on the reappointment of the Chair and members of the Board of the High National Elections Commission, 30 August 2026.

²⁹ High State Council of Libya, "An official statement about outcomes of the 4+4 meetings, August 26, 2026.

³⁰ High State Council of Libya, "The Council Holds its 120th General Session," September 8, 2026.

to the adoption of individual candidacy and the exclusion of party lists in parliamentary elections.³¹ Dar al-Ifta, through Grand Mufti Sadiq Al-Gharyani, likewise rejected the outcomes of the process, describing them as a “conspiracy against the country” and, in his view, as a U.S.-backed project aimed at enabling the Haftar family to rule Libya.³² His position added a religious and societal dimension to the dispute and demonstrated that an agreement among institutional representatives could still face resistance from actors with broader political and social influence.

The response from the eastern camp was more favourable. The General Command welcomed the agreement,³³ as did the Benghazi-based Government and other actors associated with the eastern camp.³⁴ The provisions on electoral eligibility and participation, including those concerning military personnel and dual nationals, as well as the reconstitution of the HNEC Board, help explain the positive reception of the agreement for these actors, particularly in relation to the political participation of the Haftars themselves.

The position of the HoR was more complex. Despite the support expressed by the General Command and the Benghazi-based Government, Speaker Aguila Saleh did not immediately endorse the agreement. On 10 September 2026, however, he met with HCS President Mohamed Takala in Ankara under Turkish sponsorship, where the two agreed to reactivate the 6+6 Committee and expressed their readiness to resume its work on electoral laws.³⁵ The reactivation of the 6+6 framework introduced a parallel institutional channel into the electoral process and suggested that key electoral and institutional questions had not been fully consolidated within the Smaller Convening.

The move was subsequently viewed by some political blocs within the HoR, particularly those aligned with the General Command, as reflecting reservations by the Speaker regarding the Smaller Convening outcomes. It coincided with growing tensions within the House and calls by some members for changes to its leadership.³⁶ The HoR nevertheless adopted a formal position on the agreement on 14 September, when members present in Benghazi unanimously approved the final Smaller Convening agreement. During the session, Saleh stated that the proposal was consistent with the House’s position, while the HoR spokesperson reported that the chamber had unanimously endorsed the committee’s recommendations concerning the HNEC, including the appointment of a new head and the addition of two members to its Board.³⁷

The formal endorsement of the agreement did not, however, resolve internal disputes within the House. On 21 September 2026, 86 lawmakers said they had been prevented from entering the HoR headquarters to hold a session on parliamentary reform and amendments to its internal regulations,³⁸ while the HoR spokesperson denied that an official session had been scheduled.³⁹ The lawmakers said they would continue their reform efforts, stressing that these were not intended to obstruct the electoral process or the Smaller Convening agreement. The episode pointed to continued contestation within the

³¹ Libyan Political Parties, “Letter to UNSMIL Concerning the Outcomes of the 4+4 Committee, the Electoral System, and Political Party Participation,” August 25, 2026.

³² Sadiq Al-Gharyani, “Al-Islam wa al-Hayat” (Islam and Life), Tanasuh TV, September 16, 2026.

³³ Benghazi-based Government, “The Benghazi-based Government Welcomes the Agreement of the ‘4+4’ Committee,” Libyan News Agency (LANA), August 31, 2026.

³⁴ General Command of the Libyan National Army, Statement Welcoming the Outcomes of the 4+4 Agreement, August 30, 2026.

³⁵ House of Representatives and High Council of State, “Joint Statement Following the Meeting of the Speakers of the House of Representatives and the High Council of State,” Ankara, September 10, 2026.

³⁶ Al-Wasat, “63 Members Boycott the House of Representatives Session and Insist on Amending Its Internal Regulations First,” September 2026.

³⁷ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), “UNSMIL Welcomes House of Representatives’ Endorsement of the Smaller Convening Agreement,” September 15, 2026.

³⁸ Libya Observer, “On HoR Speaker’s Orders: Military Force Prevents MPs from Holding Session in Benghazi,” September 21, 2026.

³⁹ Libyan News Agency (LANA), “Bliheq: No Official Invitation for HoR Session Today,” September 21, 2026.

House over its internal procedures and leadership. Disagreement also emerged over the quorum and legitimacy of the 14 September session, with participating MPs maintaining that it had been conducted in accordance with the legal framework governing the HoR, while those who boycotted it questioned the validity and representativeness of the decisions adopted.

Taken together, these developments illustrate the difficulty of translating an agreement reached by a limited group of influential actors into wider institutional acceptance. The Smaller Convening succeeded in bringing actors with significant political and institutional leverage into a focused negotiating process and produced agreement on several issues that had previously blocked progress. Yet the subsequent disputes over the HNEC, the authority of the HCS and HoR, the electoral arrangements and the role of parallel negotiating mechanisms showed that reaching agreement among representatives does not necessarily settle questions of institutional authority or secure acceptance from the constituencies they represent.

The Smaller Convening can therefore be understood as an important negotiating experiment, but not as a complete political settlement. Its experience demonstrates both the value and the limits of elite bargaining: a narrower format may help overcome blockages that broader dialogue alone cannot resolve, but the resulting agreement still has to be endorsed, implemented and accepted beyond the negotiating group. For UNSMIL, the challenge is consequently to connect the momentum generated by elite bargaining with the broader political and institutional buy-in required for a sustainable settlement. The continued operation of parallel negotiating tracks also raises the question of whether these mechanisms can ultimately be integrated into a coherent political framework, rather than adding further layers to Libya's fragmented institutional and political landscape.

2.2 The Boulos Plan

Origins and rationale

U.S. policy towards Libya has been characterised by limited and episodic engagement since 2011. The 2012 killing of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in Benghazi contributed to Washington's reluctance to become deeply involved in Libya's political transition. For much of the following decade, U.S. policy focused primarily on counter-terrorism, preventing the resurgence of jihadist groups and, increasingly, containing the presence of foreign military actors, particularly Russia. Washington also retained an interest in protecting Libya's oil production and the broader stability of its energy sector, but these interests did not translate into sustained high-level diplomatic engagement.⁴⁰

This changed under Trump's second administration, although it remains unclear whether the increased U.S. involvement represents a coherent Libya policy or a more personalised and transactional approach. The Libya file has become closely associated with Massad Boulos, the U.S. Senior Adviser for Arab and African Affairs, who has taken a leading role in contacts with Libya's principal political and security actors. Several interests appear to overlap in the renewed engagement, including concern over Russia's military presence, the prospect of a diplomatic success in a conflict that has remained unresolved for years, and U.S. commercial and energy interests in a country with substantial hydrocarbon resources. These interests are particularly relevant in the context of the administration's broader emphasis on commercial diplomacy. At the same time, the extent to which commercial interests, including those of actors connected to the Trump and Boulos networks, shape the Libya initiative is difficult to establish

⁴⁰ The 2014 seizure of the oil tanker *Morning Glory* by U.S. Navy SEALs, after the vessel had loaded crude oil from a Libyan port controlled by an armed group, illustrated the continuing U.S. interest in protecting Libya's oil resources and the integrity of its energy sector. See The Guardian, "US Navy SEALs seize Libyan oil tanker Morning Glory," 17 March 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/navy-seals-oil-tanker-morning-glory-libyan-rebels>.

from publicly available evidence. The Boulos initiative is therefore best understood not as the expression of a clearly articulated, institutionalised U.S. Libya policy, but as a more active and highly personalised U.S. engagement whose strategic, commercial and diplomatic objectives remain only partly defined.

Moreover, the approach privileged by Boulos, an elite deal among Libya's principal powerholders, is not new. International efforts have repeatedly sought accommodation among the actors considered most influential on the ground, from the Macron-sponsored meetings at La Celle-Saint-Cloud in May 2017 and the Élysée in July 2018, to the Palermo Conference in November 2018 and subsequent attempts to bring Haftar together with western political leaders. The underlying logic has been that a settlement must involve the actors with the greatest influence on the ground, even if agreement among them does not by itself guarantee implementation. The Boulos initiative follows this logic, but places particular emphasis on an accommodation between the Haftar and Dabaiba camps as a potential starting point for political, security and economic reunification. What appears more distinctive is the prominent role given to economic and financial arrangements as incentives for political accommodation and continued cooperation.

The emerging political bargain

The initiative appears to have originated in discreet contacts between representatives of the Dabaiba and Haftar families, facilitated by Massad Boulos. In September 2025, Ibrahim Dabaiba and Saddam Haftar met in Rome in Boulos' presence, reportedly discussing political, security, military and economic issues, including the possibility of a new unified government.⁴¹ Limited progress was apparently achieved. Boulos subsequently concentrated on economic arrangements intended to create incentives for continued cooperation, with a view to pursuing a more ambitious power-sharing formula. The initiative did not emerge as a defined blueprint shared publicly but evolved during 2025–26.

At the centre of the emerging proposal is a new unified executive combining elements of the existing eastern and western power structures. The reported formula would retain Abdulhamid Dabaiba as prime minister while elevating Saddam Haftar to head the Presidential Council, replacing Mohamed al-Menfi.⁴² The precise composition and powers of the proposed Presidential Council, however, remain unclear, as do several other elements of the arrangement.

The proposed bargain would therefore seek to make institutional reunification acceptable to the principal centres of power by accommodating their existing political and security positions within a new executive structure. Its underlying assumption is that neither side can realistically displace the other without risking renewed instability, but that both may gain from a negotiated redistribution of executive authority.

The existing balance of power between the Dabaiba and Haftar camps is therefore critical to the prospects for such an arrangement. The Dabaiba camp retains significant influence over state institutions in western Libya, as well as access to state resources and extensive political, economic, and security networks. Its position is nevertheless constrained by competition from other political and armed actors within western Libya. The Haftar camp, by contrast, benefits from a more consolidated military structure and control over much of eastern and southern Libya, alongside growing political and economic influence.⁴³ The eastern camp should not, however, be viewed as a fully unified bloc either:

⁴¹ Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). "Libya's Crisis Persists Amid Tripoli Tensions and Renewed International Role." September 11, 2025.

⁴² Financial Times, "Trump adviser pushes power-sharing plan for oil-rich Libya," June 17, 2026.

⁴³ Tim Eaton, "Escaping the Cycle of Conflict in Libya: Why an Enhanced 'Economic Track' Must Be Integrated into Political Negotiations," Chatham House, December 17, 2025.

different interests and networks within it may compete over positions, resources, and the shape of future political arrangements.

This makes the question of intra-coalition acceptance as important as the initial agreement between the two principal camps. Interviews conducted for this study suggest that the main powerholders may face difficulties carrying their wider constituencies with them. Acceptance is likely to depend on how political influence, institutional access and guarantees are distributed among the actors affected by the proposed redistribution of authority. Political institutions and armed groups in both eastern and western Libya have been identified by interviewees as potential sources of resistance, particularly where actors perceive the proposed arrangement as weakening their position or strengthening a rival. Opposition may also become more pronounced once the individuals included in a new power-sharing arrangement are publicly identified.

The challenge is therefore not simply to secure agreement between Dabaiba and Haftar, but to construct an arrangement that can accommodate sufficiently broad interests within both camps. The question of “winners and losers” extends beyond the two principal powerholders: a bargain that benefits the leading figures while leaving other influential actors with incentives and capacity to obstruct could prove difficult to implement.

From elite bargain to state reunification

The political bargain envisaged by the Boulos plan is intended to be accompanied by arrangements for security and military reunification. The US has supported confidence-building measures between the eastern and western military establishments, including the modification of the UN sanctions regime in January 2025 to permit technical assistance and training intended specifically to promote the reunification of Libya's military and security institutions.

This created a basis for joint U.S.-supported military activities, most notably the participation of eastern and western Libyan forces in the Flintlock exercise in Sirte in April 2026. U.S. Africa Command presented the participation of forces from both sides as a step towards military-institutional unification. Further military-level contacts continued during 2026, including meetings between senior eastern and western commanders and discussions of joint exercises and security cooperation. These developments demonstrate a degree of practical cooperation that was previously difficult to achieve, but they do not in themselves resolve the question of how Libya's divided military structures would ultimately be placed under a single chain of command.

Interviewees expressed differing views on the prospects for meaningful progress towards military unification. Some regarded the growing contacts between eastern and western military leaders, including meetings, joint activities, and training exercises, as positive developments that could gradually reduce mistrust and make eventual reunification more feasible. From this perspective, sustained military-to-military engagement can provide a basis for cooperation while a broader political settlement is negotiated.

Others were more sceptical, arguing that military unification is ultimately a political issue rather than simply a matter of confidence-building between military establishments. In their view, the proposed military arrangements remain unclear, particularly on the question of who would exercise ultimate authority and how existing military leaderships would be incorporated into a unified structure. Options reported discussed under the Boulos plan include a jointly led General Command involving Saddam

Haftar and a representative of the western military establishment; abolishing the existing General Command and placing military authority under a unified civilian defence structure; or dividing the country into military regions under a national command arrangement. Each option would require significant concessions from actors whose political influence is closely tied to control of armed forces. Joint exercises and meetings may consequently contribute to confidence-building, without resolving the underlying distribution of military power.

A more pragmatic view among interviewees was that full military unification may not be achievable in the short term and that a gradual approach would be more realistic. This could begin with practical cooperation in areas such as border security, counterterrorism and joint training before moving towards the integration of command structures. The key issue is therefore not simply whether military unification is possible, but how authority within a unified national military could be distributed without reproducing the political and institutional divisions that the broader settlement is intended to overcome.

Institutional reunification also raises questions about the location and architecture of the proposed unified government. Discussions have reportedly considered Tripoli and Sirte as possible locations, reflecting the difficulty of reconciling the interests of the western political establishment with those of the eastern authorities. The issue is more than symbolic: the location of the executive would affect access to ministries, financial institutions and diplomatic infrastructure, as well as the security arrangements required to protect the new government. A settlement that formally creates one executive while leaving the underlying distribution of institutional and coercive power unchanged could therefore reproduce rather than resolve the conditions of Libya's political division.

Economic reunification has been pursued alongside the political negotiations. The economic component is important to the Boulos approach because it provides a material basis for political accommodation. The eastern authorities have sought greater access to national revenues and development spending, while western authorities have sought to limit parallel expenditure and restore greater coherence to public finances. A unified spending framework could therefore provide incentives for both sides to sustain political cooperation.

Boulos's mediation contributed to agreements on public spending in November 2025 and April 2026, culminating in the signing on 11 April of Libya's first unified national budget in more than a decade. The agreement covered the principal categories of public expenditure and was welcomed by the United States and other international partners as an important step towards greater economic coordination between eastern and western Libya. So far, however, the agreement has not translated into effective fiscal unification or a substantive change in how public resources are managed. This illustrates a broader problem for the Boulos approach: economic agreements can provide incentives for political accommodation, but their value as a foundation for a durable settlement depends on whether they can be implemented through genuinely unified national institutions rather than remaining political arrangements between competing centres of power.

What remains unresolved

The central weakness of the Boulos initiative is that much of the proposed political bargain remains opaque and appears to depend on agreement among the smallest possible number of powerful actors. Boulos himself has stressed that the details of any unification agreement must ultimately be determined

by Libyans, and has described the U.S. initiative as complementary to the UN Roadmap.⁴⁴ Yet reporting on the emerging proposal suggests that its core political bargain is centred heavily on the Dabaiba and Haftar families. This creates a tension at the heart of the initiative: concentrating negotiations among actors with the greatest capacity to influence implementation may make an agreement more achievable, while also creating risks for its legitimacy and acceptance among actors who are not adequately represented.

The first unresolved issue is therefore legitimacy. A power-sharing arrangement negotiated among the two main powerholders could be more immediately implementable than a broader political process, but it would not by itself provide a new source of popular political authority. Several interviewees who see potential value in the Boulos initiative understand it as a transitional mechanism leading towards elections rather than as an alternative to them. Others remain more sceptical of another power-sharing arrangement and argue that elections should be prioritised directly. The key issue is therefore not simply whether the proposed unified executive is transitional, but whether its mandate is clearly defined, its duration is time-bound and its establishment is credibly linked to an electoral process. Without these safeguards, a new transitional arrangement could reproduce rather than resolve the prolonged political transition.

The second unresolved issue is military authority. Joint exercises and military contacts can build confidence, but they do not resolve the question of who ultimately commands Libya's armed forces or how competing military structures would be subordinated to a national authority. An arrangement that simply distributes senior positions between eastern and western commanders could institutionalise rather than dismantle existing divisions. The challenge is consequently not only to bring the two military establishments into closer cooperation, but to establish a command structure that is accepted by the principal security actors and accountable to a unified civilian political authority.

Third is political inclusion. The narrowness of the negotiations may contribute to their effectiveness, because the actors with the greatest capacity to obstruct an agreement are directly involved. The same characteristic, however, creates a potential source of instability if other political and security actors, or constituencies within the two main camps, perceive themselves as excluded from decisions that redistribute political authority and access to state resources. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that opposition could increase once the individuals included in a new power-sharing arrangement become known, particularly among actors who believe that the arrangement weakens their position or strengthens a rival. In a political system in which influential actors retain access to armed groups, exclusion is not simply a question of legitimacy: it can also create incentives and opportunities for active resistance, as well as a direct risk to the durability of the bargain.

Finally, there is the question of what follows the bargain. The principal attraction of the initiative is that it seeks to engage directly with actors whose agreement may be necessary to alter Libya's existing political and security balance, while linking political accommodation to security and economic arrangements that could provide incentives for continued cooperation. Its central risk is that accommodation would stabilise the existing distribution of power without creating a credible pathway towards renewed popular legitimacy. The critical question is therefore whether the Boulos initiative functions as a

⁴⁴ <https://lana.gov.ly/post.php?lang=en&id=360497>.

mechanism for moving from elite accommodation towards a broader political settlement, or whether elite accommodation itself becomes the settlement.

The Boulos Initiative consequently presents a particular trade-off. Its emphasis on the principal powerholders may help address the implementation problem that has constrained previous political processes, but the same emphasis may leave unresolved the questions of legitimacy, inclusion and the eventual renewal of political authority. Its significance will ultimately depend not only on whether an elite agreement can be reached, but on whether that agreement can be translated into unified institutions, a credible security settlement and a time-bound pathway towards elections without reproducing the interests and divisions of the existing political order.

3. Overall assessment and potential for convergence

Libya's problem is no longer principally a lack of political initiatives, but the difficulty of translating political agreements into arrangements that can be implemented and sustained. The preceding analysis suggests that the central challenge is not simply to reach agreement among Libya's competing political actors, but to construct a settlement that can secure political acceptance, institutional implementation and sufficient incentives for the principal powerholders to maintain it. Executive authority, institutional unification, security arrangements, economic governance and elections are therefore not separate elements of the transition. They are interconnected parts of the same settlement problem.

The two initiatives examined in this paper approach that problem from different starting points. The Boulos initiative places greater emphasis on securing an elite bargain among the principal powerholders and using that accommodation as a basis for institutional, security and economic reunification. The UN Roadmap places greater emphasis on a broader political process that combines negotiations among influential actors with wider participation, institutional reform and a pathway towards elections. The difference is therefore primarily one of sequencing, scope and sources of leverage rather than ultimate objectives. Both recognise that elections alone cannot resolve the underlying distribution of political, institutional, security and economic power, and both envisage some form of unified executive and institutional reunification as part of a transition towards renewed political legitimacy.

The distinction becomes more significant when considering what has prevented previous agreements from being implemented. An agreement that does not secure the cooperation of actors capable of obstructing it may have little practical effect, regardless of how broadly it is endorsed. At the same time, a settlement negotiated principally among existing powerholders could be more capable of implementation while stabilising the current balance of power and leaving unresolved the interests of actors excluded from the bargain, as well as the question of how political authority is ultimately renewed. Conversely, a broader political process may generate greater legitimacy and inclusion without being able to overcome the veto power of actors whose cooperation is necessary for implementation. The settlement problem therefore contains two related challenges: securing the cooperation of actors with the capacity to block change, and ensuring that the resulting political arrangement is sufficiently legitimate and inclusive to endure.

The proposed unified executive provides the clearest point of convergence between the two approaches. It is central to both approaches, but its significance depends on what the executive is intended to do and for how long. A unified government could provide the authority required to begin

institutional, security and economic reunification, but its creation would not in itself resolve the question of political legitimacy. Its mandate, duration, oversight arrangements and relationship to elections would therefore be critical. If the executive is established as a clearly defined transitional mechanism with a credible route towards elections, it could serve as an instrument of institutional reunification. If its mandate remains undefined and open-ended, however, power-sharing could become another form of transitional governance rather than a mechanism for moving beyond the transition.

The question of inclusion also extends beyond participation in the negotiating process to the distribution of the benefits and costs of the settlement. A bargain between the principal powerholders would inevitably redistribute some degree of political influence, institutional access and economic advantage. Actors within both the eastern and western coalitions could consequently perceive themselves as losing from an arrangement negotiated by the senior leadership of their respective camps. In a political environment where influential actors retain access to armed networks, such exclusion could have consequences beyond political disagreement. Those who believe that the new arrangement weakens their position may seek to obstruct implementation, challenge the redistribution of authority or mobilise their existing political and security networks. This does not mean that an elite bargain would necessarily produce renewed violence, but it means that implementation could itself become a source of instability if the new distribution of power is not accepted by actors capable of disrupting it.

The significance of the two approaches therefore depends on whether elite bargaining can be connected to a broader political settlement rather than becoming a substitute for it. An agreement among the principal powerholders could help overcome the implementation problem that has constrained previous processes, but it would need to be translated into unified institutions, credible security arrangements, accountable economic governance and a defined pathway towards elections. Conversely, the broader UN process would need to retain sufficient engagement with the actors capable of determining whether such arrangements are implemented. The central issue is consequently not whether elite bargaining or broader political participation should replace the other, but whether the two functions can be connected within a single settlement framework capable of moving Libya beyond its prolonged transitional order.

4. Potential trajectories over the next 12-24 months

The interaction between the UN Roadmap and the Boulos Initiative could develop in several directions over the next 12-24 months. These should not be understood as predictions or mutually exclusive outcomes, but rather as different trajectories that could emerge depending on whether the two tracks become more closely connected, whether elite accommodation develops independently of broader political reform, whether existing processes remain largely separate, or whether political, economic or security developments force a restructuring of the current approach. The trajectories may also evolve into one another. Fragmentation or renewed localized conflict remain possible outcomes if political arrangements fail or security and economic pressures intensify but are treated here as potential consequences of the trajectories rather than as separate political trajectories.

4.1 Convergence between the US and UN tracks

Under this trajectory, the Boulos initiative and the UN Roadmap would increasingly operate within a common political framework. An agreement among the principal powerholders could contribute to the formation of a unified executive and provide sufficient political agreement to advance institutional,

security and economic reunification. The UN process could then provide the broader framework through which the agreement is incorporated into a more inclusive political settlement and connected to elections.

Convergence would not require the two initiatives to become formally identical. Their respective forms of leverage could remain distinct: the Boulos approach could facilitate agreement among the actors with the greatest capacity to obstruct implementation, while the UN process could provide broader participation, institutional legitimacy and a framework for managing the transition towards elections.

What would make it possible

- Agreement among the principal powerholders on the composition, mandate and duration of a unified executive.
- Credible oversight and accountability mechanisms to constrain the executive and address non-compliance.
- A defined and credible pathway from the transitional arrangement towards elections.
- Coordination between the U.S.-backed initiative and UNSMIL on the sequencing and substance of the political process, with European support for implementation monitoring and electoral preparation.
- Agreement on the institutional, security and economic arrangements accompanying the formation of the new executive.

Main risks

- Different approaches between the two tracks to the mandate, duration and oversight of the unified executive.
- Resistance from political or armed actors who perceive themselves as excluded or disadvantaged.
- Institutional reunification without sufficient accountability or progress towards renewed political legitimacy.
- Formal political unification without meaningful integration of security and economic institutions.
- Intensification of the fiscal and economic crisis undermining the sustainability of the political arrangement.

Indicators

- Increasing coordination between the US-steered initiative and UNSMIL, accompanied by public clarification of the relationship between the two initiatives.
- Public clarification of the unified executive's mandate, duration and oversight arrangements.
- Progress towards institutional, military and economic reunification.
- Concrete electoral preparations linked to the executive's defined mandate and timetable.
- Evidence that agreed oversight and compliance mechanisms are being applied in practice.

- Evidence that actors outside the principal negotiating group are being incorporated into or accepting the emerging settlement.

4.2 Power-sharing deal without broader political transformation

Under this trajectory, the principal powerholders reach an agreement on the distribution of executive authority and possibly on aspects of institutional, security and economic cooperation, but the arrangement does not develop into a broader political settlement. A unified executive could be established while existing networks of political and coercive power remain largely intact.

Such an outcome could alter the formal structure of government without fundamentally changing how political authority and state resources are distributed. Elections might remain part of the stated objective but be delayed, subordinated to further negotiations or treated as a subsequent stage without sufficient mechanisms to ensure that the transition actually reaches it.

What would make it possible

- A sufficiently attractive distribution of positions, resources and guarantees among the principal powerholders.
- Agreement on a unified executive without equivalent progress on broader institutional or security integration.
- Limited pressure for immediate elections from the US, UN, European and other relevant international actors, alongside continued willingness to engage with authorities in both the east and west without making such engagement conditional to broader political benchmarks.
- Continued European and international acceptance of the power-sharing arrangement as a mechanism for maintaining stability.
- Sufficient economic resources and external support to sustain the arrangement despite limited progress on structural reform.

Main risks

- Reproduction of the existing transitional order under a different institutional configuration.
- Resistance, including through violent means, from actors excluded from the bargain or disadvantaged by the redistribution of political and economic influence.
- Continued division within security institutions despite formal political unification.
- Weakening of incentives to proceed towards elections once the principal powerholders have secured their positions.
- Further concentration of political and economic benefits among existing powerholders.
- A worsening financial and economic crisis increasing competition over state resources and weakening the durability of the arrangement.

Indicators

- Agreement on senior positions without corresponding institutional reforms.
- Prolonged or ambiguous executive mandate.
- Limited progress on military and economic reunification.
- Repeated postponement or weakening of electoral preparations.
- Continued or increased concentration of political and economic benefits among existing powerholders.
- Limited development or use of effective oversight and accountability mechanisms.

4.3 Parallel tracks and managed deadlock

Under this trajectory, the UN and U.S.-backed initiatives continue to operate without becoming fully integrated. UNSMIL continues its dialogue and negotiations, while the Boulos channel pursues separate contacts and arrangements among the principal powerholders. Other mechanisms, including the 4+4 and 6+6, may continue alongside them.

The result would be continued political bargaining without a comprehensive settlement. This could preserve the current balance of power and avoid an immediate return to large-scale conflict, but it would also allow further institutional fragmentation, competing claims over state resources and the transitional political order to persist.

What would make it possible

- Failure to reach agreement on the relationship between the different negotiating tracks.
- Continued ability of the principal powerholders to manage competition without resorting to large-scale confrontation.
- International preference for maintaining political stability while negotiations continue.
- Sufficient economic resources to sustain the existing equilibrium despite institutional fragmentation.

Main risks

- Prolonged transitional governance and continued erosion of institutional legitimacy.
- Increasing competition over state resources and economic institutions.
- Accumulation of unresolved political and security disputes.
- A relatively stable equilibrium becoming more vulnerable to a sudden political or security shock.
- Parallel initiatives becoming entrenched, making eventual coordination or consolidation more difficult.

Indicators

- Continued operation of multiple negotiating mechanisms without effective coordination.
- Repeated agreements that are not implemented.
- No clear agreement on a unified executive or credible electoral pathway.
- Continued parallel institutional and financial arrangements.
- Increasing public or political pressure over the persistence of the transition.
- Growing divergence between the positions advanced through the U.S.-backed and UN tracks.

4.4 Reshaping the political process

A significant political, economic or security development could alter the balance of incentives sufficiently to require a restructuring of the current political process. This could result from changes in the relationship between the principal powerholders, a significant shift in the security environment, intensified economic pressures, or a failure of existing negotiations that makes the current framework increasingly difficult to sustain.

Under this trajectory, neither the existing UN Roadmap nor the Boulos initiative would necessarily continue in its current form. Instead, the political process could be redesigned around a new configuration of actors, institutions or sequencing. The resulting framework could incorporate elements of the existing initiatives while responding to changes in the balance of power or the conditions for implementation.

What would make it possible

- A significant change in the political or security balance between the main camps.
- A major external or internal development that changes the incentives of the principal actors.
- Failure of existing negotiations to produce an implementable arrangement.
- Intensifying economic or institutional pressures on the existing equilibrium.
- Emergence of a new coalition or negotiating configuration with sufficient influence to reshape the process.

Main risks

- A political transition triggered by confrontation rather than negotiated accommodation.
- Breakdown of existing arrangements before a viable alternative is established.
- Attempts by individual actors or coalitions to use a changing balance of power to secure unilateral advantage.

- Further fragmentation if competing actors respond to the restructuring by establishing alternative arrangements.

Indicators

- Breakdown of established negotiating channels.
- Significant changes in relations between the principal political or security actors.
- Escalation in disputes over state resources or institutional control.
- Emergence of new negotiating coalitions or externally supported initiatives.
- Changes in the security balance that alter the incentives of the principal powerholders.
- Significant deterioration in economic or fiscal conditions that makes the existing political framework increasingly unsustainable.

4.5 Indicators of movement between trajectories

These trajectories are not mutually exclusive, and developments may move the political process from one trajectory towards another. Several indicators would be particularly important in assessing such movement:

- **Relationship between the U.S. and UN tracks:** whether their respective roles become clearer and more coordinated or remain separate.
- **European alignment:** whether the EU and key member states effectively coordinate their positions and actions behind the UN roadmap and the US initiative.
- **Status of the unified executive:** whether agreement produces a defined, time-bound transitional authority with a clear mandate, oversight and accountability mechanisms, or instead creates another open-ended arrangement.
- **Implementation:** whether agreements on political, institutional, security and economic issues translate into concrete changes on the ground.
- **Position of potential losers:** whether actors excluded or disadvantaged by new arrangements accept them, negotiate guarantees or begin to resist implementation.
- **Security balance:** whether political agreements are accompanied by meaningful cooperation between competing military structures or leave coercive power divided.
- **Electoral pathway:** whether elections remain a defined objective supported by concrete institutional, legal and logistical preparations.
- **Economic governance:** whether political accommodation is accompanied by greater coherence in public expenditure, revenue management and national economic institutions.

- **Oversight and accountability:** whether mechanisms for monitoring compliance, addressing obstruction and imposing consequences for non-implementation are established and used.
- **Fiscal and economic pressures:** whether worsening economic conditions reinforce incentives for accommodation or instead intensify competition over state resources and increase the risk of political or security disruption.

Conclusion

Libya's political impasse reflects not an absence of political initiatives, but the difficulty of translating agreements among competing actors into arrangements that can be implemented, sustained and accepted as legitimate. The UN Roadmap and the Boulos initiative approach this challenge from different starting points. The former places greater emphasis on an inclusive political process and the renewal of political legitimacy, while the latter places greater emphasis on securing agreement among the actors whose cooperation is necessary to reunify state institutions. Neither approach, on its own, addresses all the requirements of a durable settlement.

The analysis suggests that the central issue is therefore less a choice between the two approaches than whether their respective strengths can be combined. Agreement among the principal powerholders could help create the conditions for institutional, security and economic reunification, but would need to be embedded in a broader political framework capable of providing inclusion, accountability and a credible route towards elections. A broader UN-led process, in turn, would need to maintain sufficient engagement with the actors capable of obstructing implementation. The proposed unified executive could provide a point of convergence, but only if its mandate, duration, oversight and relationship to elections are clearly defined.

The trajectories outlined above show that reaching agreement among the principal powerholders would not, in itself, determine the course of Libya's political transition. A deal could facilitate convergence between the U.S. and UN tracks and support progress towards unified institutions and elections. It could instead produce a power-sharing arrangement that stabilises the existing balance of power without addressing the underlying political settlement. The two tracks could also remain parallel, allowing the current equilibrium to persist, while political, economic or security developments could force a restructuring of the process. Failure to manage these dynamics could also weaken the current equilibrium and contribute to renewed localised or broader armed confrontation. Movement between these trajectories will depend on implementation, the response of actors who perceive themselves as disadvantaged, and changes in the security and economic environment.

Ultimately, the durability of any settlement will depend on whether political accommodation produces functioning and accountable institutions rather than simply a new configuration of political power. A unified executive would not constitute a political settlement if competing security structures remain intact, economic governance remains fragmented, or elections continue to be deferred. Nor would elections alone resolve the underlying distribution of political, security and economic power. The central challenge is therefore to connect elite accommodation with institutional reunification, credible oversight and a defined pathway towards renewed political legitimacy. Whether the emerging U.S. and UN tracks

can achieve this will help determine whether Libya moves beyond its prolonged transitional order or reproduces it in a different form.

Biographies

Dr. Virginie Collombier is a political scientist and practitioner with over twenty years of combined academic and policy experience in governance, conflict transformation, and diplomacy across the Middle East and North Africa, with a particular focus on Libya. Her work bridges applied research, mediation, and public policy, with expertise in political transitions, post-conflict governance, and Mediterranean geopolitics.

She is a co-founder and President of the Mediterranean Platform, a Rome-based non-profit think-and-act organisation dedicated to research, dialogue, and education across the wider Mediterranean and MENA region.

Her relevant publications include *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya* (ed., with Wolfram Lacher), Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2023 and *Tribes and Global Jihadism* (ed. with Olivier Roy), Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2017.

Misbah Omar is a Libya-based political and social affairs expert whose work focuses on dialogue facilitation, mediation, and policy-oriented research in conflict-affected contexts, particularly in Libya.

He is a key member of the Peace Makers Libya team, a non-political initiative that has led nationwide dialogue and mediation efforts since 2015. He has also collaborated with the Dialogue Advisory Group (DAG) to design and deliver community dialogues aimed at reducing violence and strengthening social cohesion.

In parallel, Misbah serves as an expert with the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), where he contributes to research and policy discussions on governance, conflict resolution, and political transitions. He is also a founding member of the Mediterranean Platform.

He has authored numerous policy papers on Libya's political and security landscape. He is also a contributing author to *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya* (ed. Virginie Collombier and Wolfram Lacher, Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2023).

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