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Libya

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INTRODUCTION

More than a decade after the eruption of the revolution and the collapse of Muammar Qaddafi's rule, the situation in Libya remains extremely fragile. The country is still reeling from the experience of violence and armed conflict, while the political and security landscape continues to be highly fragmented. The failure so far of all efforts to reach a political settlement, restore central authority, and rebuild state institutions raise questions as to why the conflict has proven so resistant to resolution, considering that the religious and ethnosectarian divisions contributing to the complexity and perniciousness of conflicts elsewhere in the MENA region are largely absent in Libya.

This chapter traces the evolution of the conflict in Libya and analyzes the key dynamics and struggles characterizing the different phases while mapping the key actors and the modalities of their engagement. The chapter divides the evolution of the conflict into five main phases: Contested ramifications of the revolution (2011–2013); Second civil war, the ensuing violent fragmentation and the rise of Khalifa Haftar (2014–2016); The Libyan Political Agreement and the establishment of the Government of National Accord (GNA) (2016–2018); Third civil war (2019–2021); Enduring impasse and status quo (2021–2023). The chapter discusses the intra-Libyan divisions, the emergence and demise of multiple transitional governments, the proliferation of armed groups and their dominance over the political, economic, and security domains, the emergence of violent extremist groups in some parts of the country, as well as the different attempts to reach a

national reconciliation through avenues of dialogs, elections, and power sharing.

The chapter also briefly examines different forms of external intervention in Libya and the extent to which these have facilitated peace-building processes or, on the contrary, contributed to disrupting or stalling them or even enabled the perpetuation of the conflict. It thereby explores the ways in which Libya's distinctive political, social, and economic structures, the complex interplay between the interests and incentives of external actors and Libyan elites, as well as the broader regional and international geopolitics have influenced conflict dynamics and approaches to mediation and conflict resolution in Libya. The chapter thus argues that the relentlessness of the conflict in Libya is largely the result of the interplay of three factors: existing political structures, the multiplicity of actors involved, and the approaches used in mediation and conflict resolution.

EVOLUTION OF CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN LIBYA

Contested Ramifications of the Revolution (2011–2013)

On February 15, 2011, major protests erupted in the city of Benghazi in Eastern Libya against the regime of Muammar Qadhafi, following on the path of neighboring Tunisia and Egypt where a wave of uprisings resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. The regime responded with brutal repression, and clashes between protesters and regime loyalists intensified. Within a few

weeks, what began as popular mobilization quickly transformed into a violent civil war. State institutions—which had been deliberately weakened during Qadhafi's rule—disintegrated quickly,[1] and loyalties fragmented along the lines of town, tribe, and family (Lacher, 2011, 2020b).

International reactions to the deterioration of the situation in Libya were quick to appear. A number of actors, particularly France, the US, and the UK, dominated the diplomatic process and influenced the pace and content of negotiations, actively pushing for intervention and side-lining skeptical or opposing voices (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014; Lindström & Zetterlund, 2012). On March 17, 2011, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 under Chapter VII of the UN charter. Invoking the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)[2], it authorized the use of force and "all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack." The resolution also established a no-fly zone and imposed an arms embargo, travel bans, and asset freeze on several Libyan individuals and entities (including the Central Bank of Libya and the Libyan National Oil Corporation).[3] Initially, a US-led coalition launched a campaign against regime forces approaching Benghazi. On March 27, 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assumed command of the intervention in Libya and launched Operation Unified Protector. The operation lasted several months and was concluded on October 31 after Qadhafi was captured and killed and the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC)—the de facto government of Libya between 2011 and 2012—announced the liberation of the country.

NATO considered the intervention in Libya a success. NATO commanders Daalder Stavridis (2012) hailed the operation as a model for future NATO interventions as

> it saved thousands of lives from almost certain destruction. It conducted an air campaign of unparalleled precision, which although not perfect greatly minimized collateral damage. It enabled the Libyan opposition to overthrow one of the world's longest-ruling dictators. And it accomplished all of this without a single allied casualty and at a cost – $1.1 billion for the United States and several billion dollars overall – that was a fraction of what was spent on previous interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. (Daalder & Stavridis, 2012, p. 3)

Nonetheless, the intervention has been far from uncontroversial. Critics have questioned both the legality and the success of the intervention, arguing that NATO exceeded its mandate in order to pursue regime change. Terry (2015) for example argues that "NATO went way beyond protecting civilians and instead took sides in a civil war by actively supporting the anti-government forces" (p. 167), citing the rejection by NATO powers of Qadhafi's ceasefire offers and possible violations of the arms embargo by providing the opposition with military aid (Terry, 2015).

While international humanitarian interventions are often criticized for their selective engagement and response, which often reflect great power interests, some have argued that in contrast to the cases of Iraq and Syria, a more adequate context was in place in Libya, as intervention was authorized by the UNSC and called for by the Arab League (Khalifa Isaac, 2012). Khalifa Isaac also adds that "those who accuse NATO of mission creep aimed at regime change are ignoring the key, unconcealed fact that the Libyan people themselves demanded regime change and that the Libyan National Transitional Council itself did not accept the African Union's Road Map" (Khalifa Isaac, 2012, p. 122). Some observers have also argued that NATO's intervention led to the escalation and prolongation of fighting, with dramatic consequences for civilians (Kuperman, 2013). For Hamid (2016), however, the idea that the NATO intervention was responsible for Libya's descent into civil war is misleading in that it fails to consider the situation in Libya had the intervention not taken place and had Qadhafi's move to suppress the opposition not been halted.

While assessments of the intervention itself diverge, there seems to be a wider agreement that Libya should have received more support to ensure the success of the transition and recovery (Martin, 2022; Saudi & Orsini, 2022). According to Wehrey (2018), this is not for lack of assessments and plans for postintervention stabilization, but rather for lack of any real political will to act on those plans and strategies. The United States in particular was disinclined to play a central role in Libya's postconflict stabilization, preferring to let its European partners take the lead. The state of institutional collapse—the Libyan army and police forces, for example, quickly disintegrated in the wake of the revolution—and the radical transformation of both the Libyan political scene and the rules of the political process made Libya's transition a very complex and difficult process. At the same time, driven by fear of occupation, Libyans were also very wary of outside actors taking charge of state-building processes following intervention, as had been the case in Iraq. Focusing specifically on the EU and NATO, Marcuzzi (2021) argues that the failure of stabilization is largely the result of these two organizations' prioritization of local and international legitimacy over strategy and of their reluctance to deploy hard power. Many, however, believe that

deployment of troops on the ground was neither a realistic nor a desirable option. The United States, for example, has been adamant not to have any boots on the ground. The international community's "light footprint" approach in Libya underpinned the decision not to deploy a peacekeeping force in Libya (Martin, 2022).

The initial celebratory mood following the downfall of Qadhafi's dictatorship and the organization of Libya's first democratic elections in 2012 quickly vanished as the revolutionaries soon turned against each other.[4] The internal divisions and the fragmentation of the revolutionary coalition along local, family, and tribal lines became increasingly pronounced. Unresolved issues concerning the distribution of political power and control of economic resources in the aftermath of the revolution quickly festered, giving rise to competing claims to legitimacy. Libya witnessed a surge in armed groups and militias, many of which were affiliated with different parts and bodies of the fragmented government which enlisted them to maintain security in the absence of a national army and police (Lacher, 2020b; Wehrey, 2014).

The Second Civil War and the Rise of Haftar (2014–2016)

With arms being widely and abundantly available, the tensions between the different factions and armed groups reached dangerously high levels. By the summer of 2014, Libya once again spiraled into civil war. Conflict dynamics reflected the complex, multidimensional and intersecting struggles tearing postrevolution Libya apart. These included contests between Islamists and liberals, between tribes and families with long-standing feuds and rivalries, between the rival cities of Zintan and Misrata and their respective armed groups, and between self-proclaimed revolutionary groups and long-time Qadhafi loyalists or those considered to be associated with the old regime (Wehrey, 2014). Several figures believed to be connected with the army and security services under Qadhafi were targeted in a wave of political assassinations between 2012 and 2014, especially in the cities of Benghazi and Derna. Civil society activists and human rights defenders were also targets of political assassinations, kidnappings, unlawful detention, and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2013). With impunity prevailing, the perpetrators of these crimes have not been held accountable to this day.

Claiming to rid Libya of terrorists, retired general Khalifa Haftar and self-styled commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA)—a coalition of armed groups also known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)—launched an offensive on Benghazi in May 2014 under the umbrella of Operation Dignity. His definition of terrorism was, however, rather broad as it did not distinguish between moderate Islamist and militant extremist groups and was thus conveniently instrumentalized to discredit his and his allies' opponents by accusing them of being affiliated with terrorist organizations (Gråtrud & Skretting, 2017; Sizer, 2017; Wehrey, 2014). Several military units and armed factions rallied behind Haftar, and the campaign enjoyed the backing of major eastern tribal groups and families, themselves driven by a range of motivations, including opposition to Islamists, a sense of eastern regional unity, but also a strong interest in asserting claims to legitimacy and political power.

In response to the threat posed by Haftar's Operation Dignity, a loose coalition of armed groups, launched Operation Dawn, claiming to protect Libya's revolution. This operation was, among others, composed of militias from Misrata and the suburbs of Tripoli, namely the al-Qaqa and al-Sawai'q, as well as armed groups part of the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council Islamist groups, including Ansar al-Sharia—a group with ties to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) believed to have carried out the attack against the US consulate in Benghazi in 2012. Fighting between the rival camps intensified over the summer of 2014, as Dawn-aligned armed groups initially managed to repel Haftar's offensive, forcing Dignity groups to retreat from Benghazi. After heavy fighting in and around Tripoli, Dawn militias also succeeded in taking control of Tripoli International Airport and other areas under the control of the Dignity-affiliated Zintan militias.

The enduring turmoil and the breakdown of security in postrevolution Libya also created a fertile ground for jihadist activity. Ansar al-Shari'a was very active in a number of Libyan cities, including Benghazi and Derna, where it was involved in the fight against forces under Khalifa Haftar's command (Gråtrud & Skretting, 2017). The death of its leader in January 2015 and fractures within the organization contributed to its decline, while the Islamic State (IS) quickly gained a foothold and sought to expand in Libya (Zelin, 2015). Exploiting the marginalization and the growing discontent of local populations, IS took control of the city of Derna in October 2014 before establishing itself in Sirte, Qadhafi's hometown and a bastion of the counter-revolution (Chivvis, 2016). IS also took control of entire districts of Benghazi. Large numbers of foreign fighters, many traveling from Syria and Iraq, poured into Libya.

The Jihadist groups present in Libya often competed over turf, influence, and control of areas of operation (Sizer, 2017). For example, IS exploited the fissures within rival militant extremist groups (particularly Ansar al-Shari'a) to

recruit their fighters and consolidate its position within the Jihadist landscape in Libya (Wehrey & Alrababa'h, 2015). In the areas they controlled, the Jihadist groups also established their own systems of local governance, providing some services but also strictly imposing Shari'a law and deploying their own police and courts systems (Eljarh, 2015). In 2015, IS brutally beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian workers, prompting Egypt to retaliate (Aljazeera, 2015).

As the conflict escalated in Tripoli and Benghazi, civilians were caught in the crossfire between warring groups and militias, with several reports of gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law being committed by all sides. Indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas caused thousands of civilian casualties and severe damage to infrastructure depriving populations of basic services such as water and electricity (Amnesty International, 2014; OHCHR, 2014). There were also multiple reports of abductions, detentions, torture, and unlawful killings routinely perpetrated by the armed groups. The deterioration of the security situation also forced many people into displacement, with the number of IDPs estimated at around 400,000 between 2014 and 2015 (The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2015).

The Libyan Political Agreement and the Government of National Accord (2016–2018)

At the political level, Libya became effectively split between two rival governments, each supported by foreign backers. The internationally recognized House of Representatives (HoR)—elected on June 25, 2014, to replace the General National Congress (GNC)—established itself in the eastern city of Tobruk. On the opposite side, the outgoing GNC reconvened in Tripoli and unilaterally elected its own prime minister, whom it tasked with forming a Government of National Salvation (Aljazeera, 2014). This worsened Libya's political rifts and further entrenched institutional fractures. UN-sponsored talks to broker a peace deal between the rival governments continued throughout 2015, and on December 17, 2015, the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) was signed in Skhirat, Morocco. The agreement established a Presidency Council, an executive body tasked with appointing a Government of National Accord (GNA), and confirmed the HoR as Libya's legitimate parliament while incorporating GNC members in a new consultative body, the High State Council.[5] Nonetheless, this agreement left most of the contentious issues unresolved, particularly those pertaining to security

and military command (International Crisis Group, 2016). Another fundamental problem was that the HoR neither ratified the accord nor approved the new unity government headed by Fayez al-Serraj that the Presidency Council appointed. Concern about the growing threat of violent extremism also seemingly led external actors, Western powers in particular, to rush the negotiation process to quickly put in place a Libyan government that would facilitate counter-terrorism efforts (International Crisis Group, 2016). As a result, they adopted the agreement and recognized the GNA even as it lacked the support of all concerned actors, hoping that the *fait accompli* would force the opponents of the agreement to comply. This assumption was, however, contradicted by the realities on the ground. Eventually, the LPA itself became a source of tensions, and its implementation without the backing of key actors—namely the HoR, General Khalifa Haftar and a number of key eastern constituencies—ended up widening Libya's divides rather than healing them.

Soon after the GNA was formed, it became clear that it lacked the ability to project authority, both in Tripoli and beyond. Renewed fighting broke out between rival militias in Tripoli, underscoring the GNA's limited control over the capital, which largely remained under the control of armed groups. In the east, Haftar's LNA was making significant advances by taking control of Benghazi and several districts in Derna. These military victories consolidated Haftar's position and allowed his camp to expand its territorial control further to the west.

The contest between the GNA and Haftar's LNA also overlapped with competition over Libya's oil and gas fields and facilities, which has been ongoing since 2012 but intensified after the 2014 split into two governments. Libya's oil and gas facilities have repeatedly been targeted by different local actors seeking to express grievances by blockading facilities and causing production interruptions. The struggle to control hydrocarbon resources has also been intertwined with perceptions of marginalization and the need for better management and distribution of oil and gas revenues (International Crisis Group, 2015). With the bulk of hydrocarbon resources and infrastructure located in the Oil Crescent to the east, while revenues have continued to flow to Tripoli-based institutions in the west, the situation has played into the hands of federalists demanding greater autonomy for the eastern region of Berqa (Cyrenaica). One of them is Ibrahim Jadran, commander of the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) in the oil crescent, who captured the ports of Sidra, Ras Lanuf, and Zuwetina in July 2013, triggering a major oil crisis in which Libya suffered massive

losses in revenue (Laessing, 2020; Reed, 2014). In December 2014, intense fighting broke out when the GNC-backed Misratan forces launched Operation Shorouk Libya (Libya Sunrise) to dislodge Jadran's forces from the Gulf of Sirte. The clashes caused considerable damage to infrastructure before the retreat of the Tripoli-affiliated forces in March 2015. Following the LPA, the Serraj-led GNA reached an agreement with Jadran, maintaining him as Commander of the PFG. In September 2016, however, Haftar's LNA took control of the Oil Crescent. When Jadran attempted another takeover in June 2018, the LNA quickly drove him away. Haftar subsequently refused to collaborate with the Tripoli-based National Oil Company (NOC), prompting the latter to suspend exports from terminals under the LNA's control. Though brief, the shutdown led to a sharp decline in oil sales and was met with disapproval, including among Haftar's foreign allies (International Crisis Group, 2018). The struggle over control of hydrocarbon resources brought the economic drivers of the conflict in Libya to the fore. Interacting with a multitude of other tensions and deep-rooted grievances at different levels, these drivers influenced conflict dynamics and contributed to derailing political processes to resolve it (Costantini, 2016). At the same time, Libya's chaotic political and security situation further entrenched state weakness and prevented the consolidation of state institutions. This in turn enabled the emergence of a war economy based on smuggling, human trafficking, predation of state resources, racketeering, and extorsion (Eaton, 2018).

The Third Civil War (2019–2021)

The consolidation of Haftar's LNA/LAAF since 2016 marked a turning point in the Libyan conflict (Eaton, 2021; Lacher, 2020c). In April 2019, Haftar launched a surprise attack to capture Tripoli. The attack jeopardized ongoing efforts by United Nations Special Envoy Ghassan Salame to negotiate a political settlement. In fact, Haftar's advance on Tripoli took place at the same time that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was conducting an official visit to Libya in preparation for a national peace conference scheduled for later that month. In response to Haftar's assault on Tripoli, factions and militias in the west put aside their rivalries and rallied behind the GNA's counter-offensive. Relentless fighting ensued between the two camps. However, contrary to Haftar's expectation of a swift victory—ostensibly was also shared by his foreign backers—neither camp could prevail, even though the balance of power was clearly tilting in favor of Haftar, having

the blessing of foreign powers such as UAE, France, Egypt, the Trump administration, and the support of Russian mercenaries (Lacher, 2020c). It was against this backdrop that the GNA called on Turkey to send troops, as part of a twofold agreement between Ankara and Tripoli on security and on maritime border demarcation. Turkey's intervention in January 2020 reversed the trend, and the GNA was able to retake territory from Haftar's forces. The interference of foreign powers further complicated the conflict and rendered the prospects for resolution even slimmer. What used to be a conflict between highly fragmented local actors and alliances (Lacher, 2016) now assumed an international dimension, with extremely high risks of it becoming a full-blown proxy war that could potentially cause the implosion of Libya and the destabilization of the entire region (Megerisi, 2019; Wehrey, 2020). Libya became the theater of wider geopolitical rivalries and competition over influence. Breaching the arms embargo, foreign powers supplied their Libyan proxies with a range of military capabilities, including unmanned aerial vehicles, armored trucks, and air defense systems.[6]

Enduring Impasse and Status Quo (2021–2023)

With Turkey's involvement and given the ability of the different factions to mobilize foreign support, the conflict reached a military stalemate, creating a window of opportunity for negotiations. In October 2020, a ceasefire was brokered by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and signed by the warring parties. In accordance with the roadmap adopted by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), an interim government, the Government of National Unity (GNU), was formed in March 2021 and tasked with organizing presidential and parliamentary elections by the end of the year. However, failure to reach agreement on electoral laws and the constitutional basis of the elections ultimately led to the collapse of the electoral process, and the elections scheduled for December 24, 2021, never took place. Since then, Libya has been in a situation of limbo, with competing claims to political legitimacy (Bourhrous, 2022).

More than a decade after the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya thus continues to be wedged in a complex and troubled transition. While the intensity of the conflict has decreased, occasional clashes between nonstate armed groups still occur. As institutional divides endure and Libyan elites engage in internecine struggles, a political resolution of the conflict continues to be elusive. The price of this delay is paid by ordinary citizens who continue to be denied the right to choose their

political institutions and whose everyday lives are disrupted by pervasive insecurity and inadequate access to public services. According to data from the Arab Barometer survey, the prolonged deadlock has largely destroyed Libyans' trust in political institutions, with 83 percent of respondents saying they have "not a lot of trust" or "no trust at all" in HoR, and with 70 percent stating the same for the High State Council, and 61 percent for the GNU (Arab Barometer, 2022). Years of conflict and violence have also profoundly torn apart the social fabric of Libyan society and altered its inter-community and interpersonal relationships (Collombier & Lacher, 2023). Young Libyans have seen their expectations in life, their trust in politics, and their relations to their communities dramatically transformed by the experience and trauma of violence (Khalifa, 2022).

CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS OF MEDIATION AND PEACEBUILDING IN LIBYA

The relentlessness of the conflict and the failure so far of all efforts to reach a political settlement, making possible restoring central authority and rebuilding state institutions, raise many questions. For example, why has the Libyan conflict proven so resistant to resolution despite the absence of significant religious and ethnosectarian divisions constituting a key factor in the perniciousness of conflicts elsewhere in the MENA region (e.g., Syria and Iraq)? The enduring failure of conflict resolution is also puzzling considering that Libya has a small population and significant wealth from oil resources (Wehrey, 2018). A theory that can help explain this is William Zartman's "ripeness" theory. This theory would suggest that the conditions for the resolution of the Libyan conflict are simply not met as long as the warring parties do not perceive "a mutually hurting stalemate"—a deadlocked situation in which no party can achieve victory—and as long as they do not see a way out of the conflict (Zartman, 2000). Although the ripeness theory has been heavily criticized—not least for being circular and tautological (Kleiboer, 1994)—it does highlight the importance of conflict intensity and material dimensions on the one hand and perceptions of conflict parties on the other. In this regard, it would seem that the closest Libya came to a hurting stalemate was in 2020 following the deployment of Turkish troops, which made it clear that military victory was not possible, paving the way for reaching the agreement establishing the GNU in 2021. Eventually, however, divisions reappeared, and the different

factions reverted to confrontation, albeit at lower levels of violence. Other factors may also have contributed to deferring the point of the "hurting stalemate" and to the conflict grinding on: oil revenues continued to accrue, the central bank continued to pay the salaries of troops in eastern Libya enlisted in Khalifa Haftar's army, and different camps continued to receive support from their respective foreign backers. In addition, the ongoing struggles of Libyan elites for power seem to suggest that the different parties continue to think that their favored outcomes can be achieved. Engaging in a zero-sum power game, rival elites have little incentive to compromise to resolve the conflict. In his remarks to the Security Council, SRSG Abdoulaye Bathily pointed to the unwillingness of Libyan actors to resolve the conflict, stating that maintaining the status quo "seems to suit them" (United Nations, 2024). In prolonging the conflict from which they profiteer, Libyan elites are acting as spoilers, undermining efforts to reach a political settlement.

While ripeness theory does have some explanatory value, understanding the persistence of the conflict in Libya nonetheless requires considering how existing structures (which create a sense of path dependency), the actors involved, and the approaches used have converged and interacted to produce such an exceedingly complex outcome. First, the nature of the social and political structures that existed in Libya prior to the conflict has significantly contributed to the failure of efforts to restore political legitimacy. In particular, the legacy of the deep-rooted model of "the stateless society"—strengthening personal rule and privileging informal relationships and clientelist networks while weakening institutions—has made the task of restoring central authority and building institutions extremely difficult (Vandewalle, 2012). The case of Libya thus highlights the dilemmas of rebuilding the state following the breakdown of central authority when the very institutions to be rebuilt were themselves brittle and weak. What is unique about Libya is that it is almost a case of state-building from scratch, owing to a historical resistance to state-building and a longstanding "aversion to reliance on state institutions" (Anderson, 1990, p. 288). This has made it extremely difficult for revolutionaries and new leaders to create a new political imaginary and "break free from the pull of an exploitative, hyper-personalized reign that pitted communities against one another and atrophied institutions, the sinews of governance" (Wehrey, 2016). Thus, Lisa Anderson's prediction that "no doubt Libya will eventually be forced to come to terms with its statehood, and only at that point will the true costs of today's refusal be apparent" (Anderson, 1990, p. 301) has arguably been proven accurate. After

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the collapse of central authority and the highly personalized rule of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya found itself confronted with what, at its core, is a problem of constitution, in the broader sense of the foundation of a political community and the establishment of a new political system to govern this body politic.[7] While the connection between processes of state-building and peacebuilding, and the extent to which the former contributes to the latter, is one of the thorniest issues that peacebuilding scholars and practitioners grapple with, Libya arguably presents a case where state-building has profound implications for peacebuilding. In the absence of a political settlement, Libya's state-building project remains unfinished, and the creation of a peaceful, inclusive Libyan political community that represents all Libyans continues to be a rather remote prospect.

Second, the multitude of actors involved in the Libyan conflict—both domestic and foreign—has added other layers of complexity, making a political settlement harder to obtain. Domestically, fragmentation in post-Qaddafi Libya has reached extreme levels, with different actors carving up spheres of influence and establishing control over parts of the territory and parts of the state and its resources (Lacher, 2020b). Moreover, alliances and alignments have been constantly shifting throughout the country, and only Haftar has managed to dominate rival groups in the east and consolidate his power. The sheer number of actors and the fluid nature of alliances have thus constituted a major obstacle for brokering and building support for deals and agreements. Moreover, the meddling of foreign actors, each offering their support to warring parties to protect their competing interests in Libya, has aggravated the situation, with the conflict dangerously assuming the features of what some have described as a proxy war and others have seen as the internationalization of the Libyan civil war (Lacher, 2020a; Megerisi, 2019; Wehrey, 2020).

Finally, the third factor pertains to the conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches as such. The case of Libya shows many of the problems confronting international mediation and peace processes, especially under the aegis of the United Nations, in a context of multipolarity and weak multilateralism. The fact that a number of international actors have themselves been involved in the conflict has obviously contributed to undermining processes of conflict resolution as it has effectively signaled that the international community was uncommitted to peace in Libya (Elhennawy, 2020). Moreover, the international community's lack of unity on Libya has enabled Libyan warlords to act with impunity and has allowed spoilers to escape accountability for derailing Libya's transition. For example,

divisions within the UN Security Council have contributed to its failure to impose sanctions on many Libyan figures, including Khalifa Haftar (Kadlec & Haenlein, 2023).

From the outset, UNSMIL was not given the necessary means (such as peacekeeping forces) to enforce an ambitious mandate. The mission was expected to "restore public security and order and promote the rule of law," "promote national reconciliation," and "extend state authority."[8] A subsequent resolution further expanded the mandate to include tasks such as "human rights monitoring and reporting" and "support for securing uncontrolled arms and related materiel and countering its proliferation."[9] In the absence of enforcement power, UNSMIL proved unable to implement this mandate as it constantly had to deal with foreign interference and domestic spoilers. A series of missteps and miscalculations have, however, also marred the mediation process and tarnished UNSMIL's credibility and reputation as an impartial actor (Asseburg, Lacher, & Transfeld, 2018).

The need to broker a power-sharing agreement has largely guided UN mediation and the overall approach to conflict resolution in Libya. Here too, the complexities of building peace are manifest. The key tension is between stabilization in the short run and ensuring long-term stability. While power-sharing agreements can be useful for ending violence, they tend to leave the root causes of violence and insecurity unaddressed, which often diminishes the prospects of sustainable peace and long-term stability (McCulloch & McEvoy, 2018). The problem with power-sharing agreements and elite bargains is that they not only give primacy to powerful elites but also legitimize them, allowing them to further consolidate their power.

Another fundamental issue is the use of elections as a peacebuilding mechanism (Reilly, 2017; Sisk, 2013). Some argue that the international community has seen elections as panacea to Libya's perils, rushing the electoral process even when the conditions were not in place (especially since no elections have been organized in the country for several decades). Others argue that, despite their shortcomings and pitfalls, elections constitute the only way to avoid endless transitions in order to restore legitimacy in the aftermath of civil war. However, the lack of a constitutional basis for elections has also represented a considerable challenge. Much of the current gridlock in Libya has been connected to the enduring disagreements among Libyan actors on the constitutional grounds for organizing elections and the electoral laws that would govern them (Bourhrous, 2022).

The focus on securing a power-sharing agreement and organizing elections in Libya highlights the tendency to prioritize national level struggles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

Libya's extreme fragmentation and the entanglement of highly localized conflicts with national level dynamics suggest the need for approaches that also give adequate attention to local peacebuilding. While there have been some local peacebuilding initiatives—including, for example, community-led efforts to reduce insecurity by controlling the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) (Tartir & Florquin, 2021)—such initiatives have not received enough support from the international community. In other words, the heavy emphasis on elite bargains and power-sharing agreements has not been matched or complemented by serious commitment by international actors to local peacebuilding in Libya.

Conclusion

More than a decade after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi, the situation in Libya remains extremely fragile. Efforts to end the conflict and rebuild the state have largely failed, despite the absence of significant religious and ethnosectarian divisions constituting a key factor in the perniciousness of conflicts elsewhere in the MENA region. This chapter has argued that the relentlessness of the conflict in Libya is largely the result of the interplay of three factors: existing political structures, the multiplicity of actors involved, and the approaches used in mediation and conflict resolution. With the collapse of Qaddafi's highly personalized and clientelist regime, Libya was confronted with the institutional weakness dominating its political culture. This weakness has made restoring central authority and building institutions extremely difficult. The multitude of actors involved in the Libyan conflict has also added another layer of complexity, with high levels of both domestic fragmentation and foreign interference. The proliferation of local actors carving up their own spaces of influence has been aggravated by foreign powers backing different Libyan factions to protect their own interests. Finally, the international community's approach to mediation and conflict resolution has been marred by the double game of external actors in Libya, undermining perceptions of impartiality. International efforts have also largely privileged power-sharing based on elite bargains, to the detriment of local peacebuilding, while restoring political legitimacy through elections has proven extremely difficult in the absence of agreement on the constitutional and electoral laws to guide them. The case of Libya thus underlines that conflict resolution and peacebuilding are about rebuilding trust, fostering reconciliation, rebuilding political institutions, and restoring the social fabric of war-torn societies. These are all complex and equally important issues that need to be addressed for Libya to turn the page of violence and conflict.

Notes

1   Many defections occurred early on, including Libyan foreign minister Moussa Koussa, and minister of interior General Abdul Fatah Younis, Justice Minister Mustafa Abdul Jalil, among many others.

2   Responsibility to protect, known as R2P is an international norm underlining the responsibility of an individual state "to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" as well as the responsibility of the international community to take collective action should national authorities be unable or unwilling to protect their populations from these crimes. See A/RES/60/1, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf

3   UNSC, Resolution 1973 (2011).

4   The General National Congress (GNC) elections of July 7, 2012 – the first national elections organized in Libya in more than four decades – were held to replace the National Transitional Council (NTC) which ruled Libya following the toppling of Qadhafi. Despite challenges, the elections were generally hailed as fair and free. A high turnout of 62 percent was registered, and results showed Mahmoud Jibril's centrist National Forces Alliance winning 39 seats (out of 200 seats), ahead of the Islamist Justice and Construction Party winning 17 seats, while independents took 120 seats. See Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Libya -Al-Mutamar al-Watani al-'am (General National Congress)'. http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2185_12.htm

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