

# Libya as a Transatlantic Litmus Test for European Strategic Autonomy

by Silvia Colombo and Dario Cristiani

The swearing in of Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU) on 15 March 2021 represented a crucial moment in the country's recent history. While a number of formidable challenges loom on the horizon,<sup>1</sup> the emergence of a new and united government represents a breakthrough whose importance cannot be underestimated in light of the legacy of fragmentation and rivalry that has characterised the Libyan transition since at least 2014. Libya is indeed entering a new phase.

In this context, the priorities of the new executive will focus on "providing good public services to citizens and pav[ing] the way for general elections and national reconciliation".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, leading the country to the elections

scheduled for 24 December 2021 is the most important goal (and technically the end of the GNU's mandate); a crucial passage that will define Libya's destiny for years to come.

In parallel to reaching that goal, a number of interlinked challenges also need to be overcome, including:

- Strengthening and overseeing the implementation of the permanent ceasefire reached on 23 October 2020, particularly with regards to the departure of all foreign fighters and mercenaries that endanger Libya's sovereignty as well as that of neighbouring countries. This latter dimension was demonstrated recently by the sudden death of Chad's President, Idriss Déby Itno.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Libya Power Brokers Welcome Accord but Challenges Lie Ahead", in *Reuters*, 6 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/39VFEEmK>.

<sup>2</sup> "Menfi Says Libya's GNU Priority Is Reconciliation and Public Services", in *The Libya Observer*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/node/17862>.

<sup>3</sup> Idriss Déby Itno was Chad's President from 1990. Re-elected for a sixth term in the 2021 presidential elections, he died on 20 April after being mortally wounded as he visited Chadian troops on the front lines facing the rebel group Front for Change and Concord in Chad (*Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad*). The group launched an attack on Chad from Libya, where they have been for years as they were part

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- Launching and sustaining the national reconciliation process.
- Addressing socio-economic problems, including the chronic lack of electricity and other primary services.
- Facilitating the reunification of Libya's key economic and financial institutions.

Notwithstanding the proactive and positive role that the United Nations, in particular the former Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Stephanie Williams, played in seizing the momentum by launching the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), recent developments would not have happened without the military defeat of Khalifa Haftar. Haftar's advance on Tripoli was halted in June 2020 by a Turkish military intervention, which paved the way for a ceasefire and generated the needed momentum to push the political dialogue forward.

Against this backdrop, European countries and the European Union only played a marginal role given their inability, or unwillingness, to intervene in a context in which military means mattered more than diplomatic negotiations and where other countries – Turkey, but also Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – were calling the shots. However, the Turkish military intervention and the recently installed GNU have now opened a new chapter

of the mercenaries fighting alongside Khalifa Haftar. Mathieu Olivier and Vincent Duhem, "Tchad: les dernières heures du président Idriss Déby", in *Jeune Afrique*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1158069/politique/exclusif-idriss-deby-itno-les-dernieres-heures-du-president-marechal-tchadien>; Edward Mcallister and David Lewis, "Explainer: Who Are the Rebels Threatening to Take Chad's Capital?", in *Reuters*, 21 April 2021, <https://reut.rs/3sAuaLv>.

for Libya in which European countries and the EU might have a greater influence, provided they make good use of the partially new international and regional contexts in which these Libyan dynamics have unfolded.

### *Libya as a litmus test for transatlantic cooperation*

The new administration in Washington has brought about a number of important changes in the international context. The United States historically displayed little interest in engaging Libya. Washington reluctantly joined the war against Qadhafi in 2011.<sup>4</sup> The horrible killing of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi in September 2012 further reduced Washington's appetite for involvement in the Libyan quagmire. The United States has long seen the country through the lens of counter-terrorism and energy security. More recently, Russia's mounting influence also represented a concern, but not to the extent to trigger a direct intervention.

In recent months, President Biden made clear that his priorities lie elsewhere. As such, it is unlikely that the United States will devote significant energies and resources to take a lead role on this dossier. Still, the mere shift in attitude concerning the US presence in the world, epitomised by the President's mantra "America is Back. Diplomacy is back", might be enough for a partial change.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Fishman, "United States: Reluctant Engagement", in Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis*, Milan, Ledizioni, 2017, p. 91-109, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/17224>.

Concretely, the new administration has hit the reset button in Libya and, while Washington has no intention to lead the diplomatic game, it is nevertheless keener on consistently supporting negotiated solutions acceptable to Libyans.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, Washington would have a formidable interest in not only supporting the ongoing political transition, but also in seeing more active European engagement.

Actors with a stake in Libya recognise that the GNU represents a step in the right direction, in spite of the significant challenges ahead. While the GNU might not have the legitimacy and the capacity to push foreign actors into a corner, let alone ensure the withdrawal of all foreign fighters or to deal with the issues related to the militias, it is still regarded as the only game in town by Turkey, Egypt, Russia, the UAE and all the other potential spoilers of the process.<sup>6</sup>

While in the past months their growing influence in Libya represented, at the same time, a defeat and a wake-up call for Europeans, the extent to which Ankara, Cairo, Moscow and Abu Dhabi are now displaying “strategic patience” – with rumours of a growing potential rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt after a standoff that lasted for over

seven years<sup>7</sup> – should not be missed by the Europeans as an opportunity to carve out a more robust role.

All this points to the fact that Libya might be the context in which Europeans can start putting their strategic autonomy ambition to a test and, if successful, send a powerful message to Washington too: a stronger and more autonomous EU should be seen as an opportunity, not as a potential problem, by the US administration.

### *A new European approach to Libya: From words to action?*

The ball is now in Europe’s court and the opportunity should not be missed. To dispel any doubts, it is clear that European foreign policy suffers from a number of shortcomings mostly related to the lack of cohesion and coherence. Often, member states conduct their own independent foreign policies and pursue their parochial interests with little or no coordination and consistency, notwithstanding the empty and recursive statements of common approaches. For example, major disagreements and also open competition have been prevalent between France and Italy – epitomised by the mutual attempts to exclude one another in the Paris Libya Conference of 2017 and the Palermo Libya Conference of 2018 –, with Germany ultimately trying its own way by convening the Berlin Conference in January 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Karim Mezran, “The Biden Administration May Have Hit the Reset Button in Libya”, in *MENASource*, 18 February 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=355141>.

<sup>6</sup> Karim Mezran and Tahani Elmogrbi, “The End of Libya’s Nightmare or the Beginning of a New One?”, in *MENASource*, 2 April 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=372601>.

<sup>7</sup> H.A. Hellyer and Ziya Meral, “Will the Page Turn on Turkish-Egyptian Relations?”, in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 21 March 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/84124>.

However, on closer inspection, divisions have not been the major problem lately. On the contrary, the challenge rests with a certain European unity in inaction.<sup>8</sup> European foreign policy making on Libya, by the member states as well as by the EU, has been too cautious, passive and erratic. On the one hand, Europeans have taken a backseat while others, i.e. Turkey and Russia, have stepped up their involvement, thus further reducing Paris, Rome or Berlin's leverage. On the other, they have mulled the self-indulgent thought that they have played a meaningful role in breaking the prolonged impasse in the negotiations that led to the ceasefire and the present GNU.<sup>9</sup> This approach contrasts strikingly with the actual evolution of reality on the ground.

Europe's poor record on Libya is contrasted with the stream of visits, declarations of support, photo opportunities, pledges (financial, political and institutional, such as the one concerning the return of the EU Ambassador to the Libyan capital at the end of April), investment plans (some of which have been taken off the shelves after more than a decade) that have brought European leaders, policy makers and private sector representatives to Libya since 15 March 2021.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nathalie Tocci et al., "From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe's Role", in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|12 (March 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13022>.

<sup>9</sup> Dario Cristiani and Karim Mezran, "Europe Should Not Delude Itself on Libya", in *EUobserver*, 1 April 2021, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/151417>.

<sup>10</sup> Noha Elhennawy, "EU Top Diplomats in Libya to Support Interim Authorities", in *AP News*, 25 March 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/italy-libya-luigi-di-maio-general-elections->

But this is not enough. The next months will be crucial as no similar opportunity will be offered again – to Libya as well as to the international community – if the GNU fails. Thus, it is of utmost importance that European leaders also turn a page in Libya – as the United States has done – and start being more concrete, constructive and, above all, proactive before it is too late.

This should happen even before the European common house, also in foreign policy terms, is put in order. The cost of not doing this is too high as pitfalls and obstacles to a successful political transition in Libya – not to mention the economic challenges – are still daunting.<sup>11</sup> It is thus really not the moment to "sit back and relax", thinking that the birth of the GNU is enough.

On the contrary, Europeans should keep up – or even increase – the pressure over the new authorities so that they remain committed to the tasks they have set to accomplish the transition goals. In parallel, full support should be provided first and foremost in the form of technical expertise, training and the sharing of best practices with regard to the sequencing of the constitutional process and the elections, and their implementation according to the original timetable and roadmap on the basis of consensual electoral procedures, as the EU has already done in the case of other countries in the region, e.g., Tunisia.

[elections-ec9730f5695db79c3fc038a74c53a213](https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/205516).

<sup>11</sup> Tarek Megerisi, "Libya Crisis: The Unity Government's Success Hides Serious Dangers Ahead", in *Middle East Eye*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/205516>.



Secondly, Europeans should be aware that sustaining the ceasefire is the precondition for political transition. In this regard, they should work together with the 5+5 Military Committee to monitor the security situation and come up with a realistic schedule and plan as far as the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of militias is concerned, which does not appear as a feasible immediate goal. On this dossier, there is now the possibility and the need to re-engage Egypt pragmatically, while still keeping key principles and values at the forefront of the bilateral cooperation with Cairo.

Thirdly, migration is another dossier that deserves to be actively pursued in this renewed European focus. It is a poisoning issue. European leaders continue to close both eyes, beyond its securitised and dysfunctional management, but it is something that stands very acutely on the list of priorities of the new Libyan leadership, particularly when it comes to the country's porous southern border. Stepping up the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya, while starting to discuss incentives, opportunities and channels for regular, circular mobility between Libya and Europe would be important actions to pursue and a tangible sign of the new approach offered to Libyans.

It is high time for the EU and the member states to demonstrate they can do more than simply cherishing the creation of the new government and seeking "a place in the sun" by engaging in the display of optimism, good intentions and generous pledges. The new European approach should instead consist of concrete actions and

tough monitoring on the crucial issues of political, economic and institutional transition, as well as the security and migration domains.

In conclusion, European credibility and leverage in foreign policy would suffer a tremendous blow, were words not followed by meaningful action. If Europeans start playing seriously on Libya, they could score important points in three interlinked matches. Firstly, they would boost their strategic autonomy also in foreign policy, thus providing more coherence and consistency to their common external action than it is the case today.

Secondly, they would strengthen transatlantic ties by showing that the US can safely leave the ball in the EU's court, provided Brussels does not let others steal it as has happened in the recent past. Thirdly, they would send a strong message about the real intentions of the EU's Mediterranean engagement to those countries that are creating troubles trying to foment internal divisions (Turkey, Russia); are backsliding on political opening and human rights despite European support (Morocco) or feel abandoned by the EU (Tunisia).

Only by taking some risks and acting on Libya will Europeans be able to capitalise on the partially new international and regional contexts and safely navigate the winds of change that are blowing across the Mediterranean.

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