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A Unified Government in Libya: Potential Regional Implications

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The recent appointment of a new unified government in Libya has fueled cautious optimism that the war-torn North African country may finally be stabilizing after a decade of chaos and conflict. But numerous obstacles remain, not least the ongoing involvement of external actors in Libya, where a broader regional conflict between competing camps has played out alongside an ongoing struggle for influence between Russia, Europe, and the US. Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates retain varying degrees of influence in the country, notwithstanding international calls for all foreign actors to withdraw. The coming months, and in particular a burgeoning rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo, will likely determine the viability of the latest breakthrough and portend its impact on internal Libyan dynamics, Egyptian stability next door, Turkish aspirations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the ongoing regional struggle over the contours of the Middle East.

For the first time since 2014, Libya has a unified government. Following a ceasefire imposed in October 2020 on an 18-month civil war stemming from the April 2019 attack on Tripoli by forces loyal to eastern strongman Khalifa Heftar, the United Nations launched yet another round of negotiations aimed at bringing about a political resolution to the decade-long state of chaos and intermittent war in the struggling North African country. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), the name given to the 75-member negotiating body, held talks between November 2020 and February 2021, ultimately producing a new interim Government of National Unity (GNU). On March 10 the GNU obtained a crucial vote of approval by the eastern-based House of Representatives, the body nominally aligned with Heftar, and five days later the GNU was sworn in. On April 16, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2570, calling on the relevant parties within the country to prepare the ground for national elections on December 24, 2021 (the date will mark 70 years since the country's independence from Italian colonial rule), and thus formally bring the country's fraught political transition to a close.

The last decade has seen numerous instances of UN-led breakthroughs unraveling following some combination of detrimental external interference, machinations by rival domestic factions, and an unchecked flow of arms nourishing militias throughout the

country. Still, elements of the current trajectory offer reasons for cautious optimism. The GNU was formed through a highly transparent vote by members of the LPDF, lending the new Prime Minister, Misratan businessman Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, and the newly restructured Presidency Council, led by Mohamed al-Menfi, a measure of public legitimacy within Libya, which the previous internationally recognized government in Tripoli, under the leadership of Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj, arguably lacked. While Menfi hails from the eastern region of Cyrenaica, his vice-chairmen on the 3-member Council represent the country's two other principal regions of Tripolitania in the west and Fezzan in the south, ensuring a more streamlined and representative body to buttress against potential claims of bias. And on the economic front, the oil-rich state has in recent months taken important steps toward auditing the various branches of the Libyan Central Bank and producing a unified national budget, both of which are critical to a more equitable disbursement of funds from oil sales, still the country's principal form of economic activity.

Yet for all these promising signs, it remains far from clear that the various regional and international actors that have entrenched themselves in Libya in recent years will now depart the scene and allow a more robust semblance of sovereignty to reemerge. Since the 2011 uprising, and especially following the 2016 defeat of the Islamic State's (Daesh) Libyan province – the largest such presence outside the group's core territory in Iraq and Syria – the country has been a locus of the intensifying regional conflict between various camps competing for influence. In the domestic confrontation between the Tripoli-based government and its affiliated militias in the west, on the one hand, and Heftar's eastern-based forces on the other, the former benefited from funding and weapons from Turkey and Qatar, while the latter came to rely heavily on support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates – a division mirroring the broader regional split between pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood blocs.

Perhaps the starkest reflection of this regional schism came in 2019, when Heftar's gambit for Tripoli ultimately prompted Turkey to launch a military intervention (which included the deployment of several thousand Syrian mercenaries) aimed at pushing back Heftar's forces from the capital and more broadly counteracting Egyptian and Emirati influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Cairo responded by drawing a red line at the Sirte basin and threatening a military invasion in the event Turkish forces crossed it. Overlaying this regional dimension is an international one, insofar as a growing contingent of Russian mercenaries with the Wagner Group – now estimated to number around 2,000 – have been stationed in Libya since 2017, mostly lending support to Heftar's forces and taking advantage of a relative absence of the United States and Europe to establish a Russian foothold in the southern Mediterranean and challenge NATO's traditional dominance there.

Both the October ceasefire agreement and the UNSC resolution adopted earlier this month called on foreign forces to depart Libya, but there remain an estimated 20,000 such forces on the ground, and there is little indication the relevant sponsors plan to heed diplomatic calls to reduce their meddling in Libyan affairs. In December, Ankara extended Turkey's troop deployment in Libya for an additional 18 months, in apparent violation of the ceasefire deal, and more recently Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said that he will withdraw Turkish troops only if other foreign powers do so as well. (Significantly, Turkey has also obtained public assurances from Prime Minister Dbeibeh that Libya will honor a highly controversial maritime delimitation agreement the GNA signed with Ankara, which if implemented would seriously impede plans for the EastMed pipeline, a project in which Israel and its allies in the Eastern Mediterranean have a clear interest.) For their part, the Emiratis are reportedly continuing to provide funding to Heftar, even as their overt military profile in Libya has diminished of late. And in recent days, a Libya-based Chadian rebel group, whose troops have provided mercenary support to Heftar, launched a cross-border incursion (reportedly with Wagner support) said to have led to the death of Chad's President, Idriss Déby, a highly destabilizing event for the Sahel region to Libya's south that could further endanger the country's fragile ceasefire and political transition.

In the near term, whether the recent political breakthrough stabilizes Libya and its neighborhood may well depend on the outcome of Erdogan's recent overtures to Cairo. To the extent such overtures translate into a Turkish-Egyptian detente, the lowering of tensions between Ankara and Cairo will likely help cool temperatures within Libya. A deeper rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt (and, by extension, the UAE) would ultimately carry more significant implications for the broader regional struggle between the more pragmatic Sunni states and their rivals among supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, but for the time being the extent of the potential shift remains to be seen. In the meantime, policymakers in Jerusalem would do well to continue monitoring developments in Libya, not only for what they reveal about the country's evolving internal dynamics, but for their impact on Egyptian stability next door, Turkish aspirations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the broader regional struggle over the contours of the Middle East.