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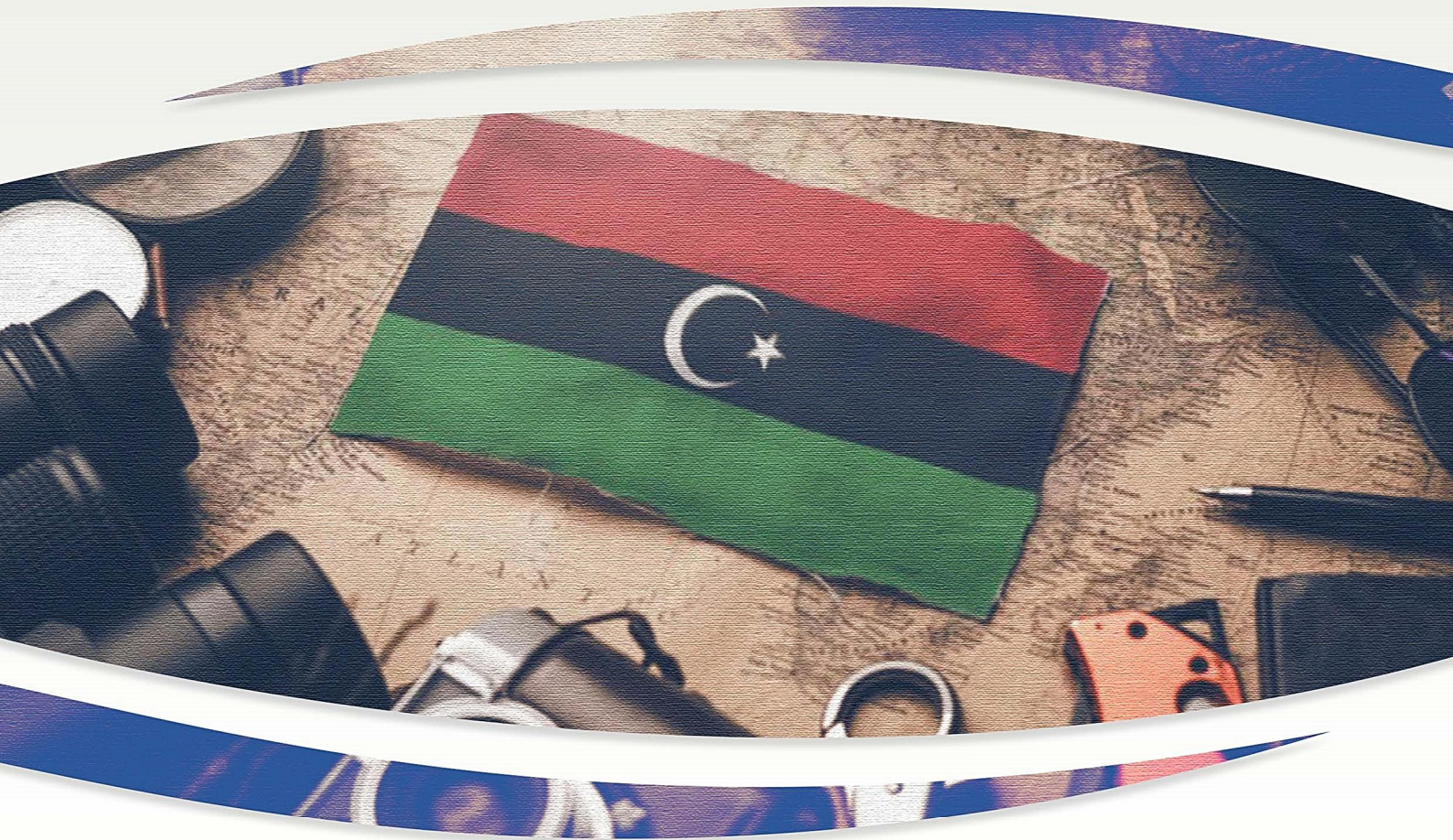
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The Libyan Political Dialogue:
A Perspective on the Obstacles to Peacebuilding

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THE LIBYAN POLITICAL DIALOGUE:

A PERSPECTIVE TO OBSTACLES OF PEACE BUILDING

By Walid Ali

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S administration has been notably active during July and August in finding a way out of the Libyan crisis through proposing a demilitarized zone in Sirt and Jufra and bush forward the peaceful political dialogue.

The U.S considered the current frozen situation has given Russia a chance to increase its influence, in the east and midst of Libya, by "fait accompli" policy. In addition, it feared that the dangerous military situations might lead to explode regional conflict in the country. Both factors might not serve the accounts of the coming American elections next November.

Because of the U.S impact, both Libyan rivals, president of House of Representatives (HoR) Agila Saleh and chairman of the Presidency Council Faiz Saaraj, have released synchronous statements on 21 August 2020, announcing ceasefire. This followed by an international welcoming included all parties involved in the Libyan crisis who called their local allies to return to the political dialogue path led by the U.N.

However, there are questions that need answers. Is it possible to attain a Libyan Political Dialogue which could pave to achieve a sustainable peace, lead to a genuine compromise for the basic issues among Libyan factions and create a collective security concept for them; since the crisis in Libya becomes a hostage to regional and international struggles in a shade of international order with full of distrust, ruled by conflicting interests and lack to a supreme power?

Will the regional and international conflict on the Libyan ground lead to a nominal compromise allowing freezing of conflict (neither war, nor peace), which boost the influence of the foreign parties at the expense of solving the Libyan conflict permanently?

This paper summarizes that the reason behind the failure of previous round talks in reaching positive results, is the absence of basic disputed issues which through them an understanding can be built on basis of the supreme interests that gather the Libyan nation. Subsequently, this creates a reason for coexistence and achieve integration among the historic regions and their social components with their all tribal and ethnics differences.

The key issues are defining terrorism, determine the prime security boards which can mobilize violence, commitment of taking out mercenaries, distribute the natural resources and choose a transitional political system that doesn't allow a person, city or a region to solely rule Libya.

The dialogue mustn't be a hostage to interests of foreign countries which seek to form a talks table and its agenda, dominate the outcomes and turns the dispute to be restricted on distributing posts and benefits among the participated Libyan elite in talks. This will lead to freeze and hide the conflict instead of solving it.

* INTRODUCTION

In fact, seeing that the traditional status of society in Libya, it is quite clear to understand that it is dominating by tribal character with diverse ethnics and loyalties, attached by inner geographical split, besides the short experience of the state in Libya which its natures and goals aren't clear yet; makes any thought about peace in Libya has to be very much connected with the idea of establishing the state in Libya in 1951 (Al-Shaheedi, Al-Hamzeh and Ezzidine 2019), (Dupree 1958).

Although passing 69 years of announcing the Independence of Libya and uniting its three regions (Tripoli in the west, Cyrenaica in the east and Fezzan in the south) however, Libya lacks the concept of one united nation (according to modern definitions of nations) who shares enough mutual interests and reasons to live together. Practically, that is not exist yet or at least it is not framed by a national project carries a realistic political, economic factor which have an impact on the ground.[1]

After the fall of Gaddafi's regime at the end of 2011 and commencing the political transitional process, the idea of reestablishing the state wasn't existing and nobody cared about organizing and uniting the society, but they just enjoyed the pleasure of obtaining freedom.

Moreover, politicians they were just confined to copy the transitional political map from other experiences in countries of the Arab spring like Egypt and Tunisia and fabricate ideological disputes of modern political concepts (Seculars & Islamists) which led to hide the reality of the Libyan disputes and caused a destructive impact on the Libyan revolution turning it to a civil war.

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1. One of the contemporary definitions of (a nation) is related to the unity of the will and desire of the social components to coexist. The definition that Ernest Renan called in his famous essay "What is a Nation" written in 1882, also defined the nation as "a daily referendum" to express a desire to live in a group.

Likewise, many challenges emerged early over the broad outlines of the political road map of Libya after Ghaddafi, such as the disagreement on the electoral law as some electoral stations were attacked in Benghazi in July 2012 (Carter Center 2012).

The election was seen by some activists and tribal leaders in east of Libya as a continuation of a discriminatory central system that was based in Tripoli and marginalized the Cyrenaica region for decades. It was obvious that, the dispute seemed to be stemmed from the structural historical differences between the Libyan regions, particularly Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.[2]

In order to avoid the new Libya having a fragile base, observers warned at early stages that unless the Libyan transnational authorities engage with the concerns of Cyrenaica, Libya may fall into a chaotic civil war that would frustrate its long-suffering citizens (Ahmed and Martin 2013).

Eventually, the transitional political path, based on the Constitutional Announcement declared in 2011, hasn't succeeded in restrain security and political chaos which led to a series of civil wars backed by ideological and tribal backgrounds. Also, it led to split the authority to be one in the east backed by HoR and military leadership by General Khalifa Haftar and another one in the west, internationally recognized, led by Faiz El-Sarraj.

Thence, when Libyans failed in finishing their conflicts, they asked help from foreign countries to back them against each other which turned Libya to be a prime regional field of struggle and Libyans started to act as fighters for a proxy war involved in it different countries with different interests.

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[2] Poort, David. "The Battle for Federalism in Libya's East". *Al Jazeera Net*. July 3, 2012. https://www. aljazeera.com/indepth /inpictures/2012/07/20127213476184851.html. Accessed February 24, 2020.

* Conflicting regional interests makes the crisis more complicated

A condition of the sovereign vacuum happened to the Libyan state after the involvement of NATO to overthrow Ghaddafi, has allowed foreign interventions that made Libya an open field for international conflicts, reflects competitive and contradictory regional and international geopolitical interests and projects, which seriously threatening the Libyan crisis and might make it endless.

Despite that the Libyan social structure, which is dominated by tribal and ethnic factors, is already ready for getting involved in conflicts; but the foreign intervention in the Libyan issue has used to fuel the conflicts and deepening the splits.

Recently another economic incentive for international and regional powers have appeared especially after Korona pandemic which make the Libyan issue to be again a hostage to such struggles:

1) The escalating conflict on the gas resources of the eastern Mediterranean and the disputes on maritime borders demarcation among countries of the region.

2) The U.S and Russia influence conflict since Libya represents a strategic and geopolitical importance to the U.S because it might be a gate to a new Russian Chinese project in an area considered to be under the U.S influence.

3) An ideological conflict related to the outcomes of the Arab spring among the countries in the region.

Despite the international efforts to achieve Libyan political dialogue, -(Such Berlin Conference held on January 19th, 2020)- the relationship of the mentioned issues with the Libyan crisis complicates the hopes of reaching a compromising political solution to be designed on the requirements of the local struggle, away from any considerations related to the regional conflicts on the region's influence.[3]

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[3] The conclusion of Berlin Conference on Libya https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/the-berlin-conference-on-libya-1713882

The conclusion of Berlin Summit means that the countries which were presented in the conference will not get involved in the Libyan conflict and support a ceasefire. Only one week after the summit, the countries backing rival factions in Libya have violated an arms embargo sending numerous cargo and flights to airports in western and eastern of Libya and providing with weapons, vehicles, advisers and fighters.[4,5]

In fact, the Libyan case has shown that how the uncertainties in the global and regional political economy cumulatively stirred further uncertainties and fragilities in MENA region by interacting with inherent institutional and political crisis (Amin 2011).

* Transitional Political Customs

In anticipation of the falling for Ghaddafi regime, the Transitional National Council (TNC), has issued on 03 August 2011, a Constitutional Declaration in order to be a basis for ruling during the transitional phase. That happened amid argument and disagreement on the proposed road map, which claimed the futility of conducting elections before establishing constitutional fundamentals and principles. At that time other calls of activating the Independence Constitution of Libya issued on 1951, have been erupted.

On the other hand, despite conducting elections in July 2012, in accordance to the Constitutional Declaration which called for forming General National Conference (GNC) – amid territorial arguments and boycott by the Federal movement in Cyrenaica over the distribution of the conference's seats –, the transitional political project failed in forming a central authority able to unite people and provides tranquility to all social components in addition to create a ground for dialogue about the essential issues.

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[4] Reuters. 26 January 2020. Several countries have breached arms embargo agreed at Libya summit: U.N. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/several-countries-have-breached-arms-embargo-agreed-at-libya-summit-u-n-idUSKBN1ZO0SS?il=0.

[5] UNSMIL. 25 January 2020. UNSMIL Statement on Continued Violations of Arms Embargo in Libya. https://unsmil.unmissions.org/unsmil-statement-continued-violations-arms-embargo-libya.

The unstable situations continued until violence erupted by launching the dignity and Libyan Dawn military operations in May 2014 and July 2014 respectively, which led to a complete collapse to the transitional political path when the Supreme Court in Tripoli judged to dissolve the elected Parliament. This of course resulted to split the authority into two: the elected Parliament went to the east as the GNC has returned itself to power and start operating again from Tripoli.[6]

Therefore, the UNSMIL and some western ambassadors sought to repair the collapsed transitional political path by running talks between parliaments and some independents, chosen by UNSMIL, which resulted to Sakhirat agreement in December 2015.

In fact, the international efforts aimed to centralize the power in hands of part of elite and terminate the other autonomous entities (Security Council, Resolution 2259, 2015).[7]

The UNSMIL has adopted, during running talks, a policy of "constructive mystery", as said by one of the participants in talks. This means keep silence of issues of dispute since UNSMIL thought that the solutions lie in avoiding the prime points of dispute and named new government but without paying attention to attempt finding a mutual background of principles which might this transitional project could go from, as a phase of the peace phases.[8]

In a hurry, the special envoy of UN general secretary to Libya Bernardino León, has announced a political achievement and named a prime minister, backing himself with some economic and security procedures which have no impact on the ground. Thus, the dialogue has never come out by any pact which can be able to produce any mutual principles about the essential issues.

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6. BBC. November 6th 2014. Libya supreme court 'invalidates' elected parliament. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29933121

7. Security Council. 2015. Resolution 2259. http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2259
8. Al-Raaed Channel. January 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ke2Y7JKl4E

The most important issues, which were absent from the dialogue, are terrorism, which was extending at the region, second a process of distributing the natural resources, and third historical disputes among the Libyan regions and finally fate of the transitional justice project.

In addition to the meaningless agenda, the way the UN Mission selected the participants affected the final outcome of the dialogue process. The Libyan regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan) were not represented directly on the dialogue table nor were the historical differences discussed. Instead, the dialogue included political elite and interest groups to preserve their personal and factional interests rather than making a national reconciliation or a framework of peace process.

Behind the façade of legitimacy of international community, the agreement was a compromise between interest groups to preserve their interests rather than a national reconciliation or a peace process between the Libyan regions and its social components.

Thus, violence continues and predation of economy exacerbated despite the existence of internationally sponsored Government of the National Accord (GNA) which later on became a part of the local conflict.

Again, these transitional political customs which the political dialogue based on by supervision of UNSMIL, that proposes the solution is just a finding compromise for the current powers on the ground such as remaining of the split HoR, Presidency Council, and High Council of State. They just share the high posts of the state, forming new Presidency Council and government which be imposed by foreign powers and lead only to freezing and hiding the root causes of the conflict but not solving it.

* Freezing the Conflict Instead of Solving it:

The frozen conflicts inside the political entity are threatening its stability and viability. Despite sometimes they seem inactive, but they continue invisibly tearing the society and prevent building of trust among different levels of people in the society which lead them to deal by their minor interests instead of the major interests of people like happening in Lebanon and Iraq.

Likewise, over nine years of successive civil wars, the conflict in Libya have showed the roots of tribal and ethnics struggles inside the Libyan society which are really needs to be solved. However, UNSMIL and the foreign powers still insist that the struggle is limited to the way of distributing official and government posts among the powers on the ground.

The current Libyan crisis is strongly connected to the conflict of regional powers which hostages the Libya crisis to their interests and work on confirming splits besides prevent any a comprehensive political reconciliation, as Frederic Wehrey sees (Wehrey 2014).

From other hand, Dr. Wolfram Lacher (Middle East and Africa Senior Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP) thinks that the military foreign intervention will be an obstacle in achieving a political compromise in Libya. He suggested that the Libyan conflicted parties don't own the decision of pulling of foreign mercenaries in addition to that they are significantly rely on the foreign military support.[9] Lacher argues that the agreement on stopping the war in Libya and finding a united military institution and a unified executive government, could reduce the foreign intervention.

Accordingly, the foreign parties involved in the Libyan crisis will see their interests in freezing the conflict in a way they could manage it, instead of solving it permanently.

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[9] Lacher, Wolfram. 2020. How can Europe Help to Prevent the Carving-up of Libya. Qantara.de. https://en.qantara.de/content/a-truly-international-conflict-how-can-europe-help-prevent-the-carving-up-of-libya?nopaging=1. Accessed by Sep. 13, 2020.

* Consequences and Recommendations

1. UNSMIL efforts haven't succeeded to set a road map lead to achieve neither to permeant nor temporary peace because of its bad valuation to the inner geopolitical and social factors of Libya. In addition to its exposure to the impact of the local political lobbies and their foreign sponsors.

2. May be the sole implicit agreement that gathers the regional and international powers involved in the Libya crisis is to prevent happening of direct local reconciliation because their interest is to keep the ongoing conflict as they just confine to freeze it via a nominal compromise which they can be able to manage it.

3. Stopping a civil war and find a crucial solution for it is a complex process, especially since there is kind of military balance between the conflicted sides and the ability of these sides for gathering and receiving support from the foreign sponsors.

4. The continued historical disputes amid cities and regions in Libya, rights of minors and local conflicts, can be solved only by political convention emerges from a transparent dialogue, can never be solved by attempting of find balances in war and military conflicts.

5. The elements of the Libyan national unity still exist, but the achievement of unity project requires objective local elite that adopts rational thinking which could realize the crisis nature of national state in Libya, be aware of the requirements for reestablishing the Libyan nation and succeed in define mutual reasons that makes Libyans willing to hold on for coexist together.

Endnotes

1. One of the contemporary definitions of (a nation) is related to the unity of the will and desire of the social components to coexist. The definition that Ernest Renan called in his famous essay "What is a Nation" written in 1882, also defined the nation as "a daily referendum" to express a desire to live in a group.

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