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Libya's political dialogue needs more security content

By Virginie Collombier*

The formation of a Government of National Accord (GNA) between Libya's warring factions has been delayed once more as representatives of the General National Congress (GNC) withdrew from talks a few weeks after refusing to sign the preliminary agreement initialed by all other participants on 11 July.

While there is still hope that agreement on a GNA can be reached shortly, such a consensus government will not be able to durably carry out their mission unless simultaneous progress is made on interim security arrangements. For a GNA to take office in Tripoli and effectively run the country, it will first and foremost have to be able to use government buildings in the capital city, which will require that pro-agreement armed groups seize and secure them.

At the time of writing, Tripoli-based militias – as well as a handful of militia leaders from Misrata and Zawiya – have supported GNC hardliners, thereby representing a direct threat to the implementation of any political accord concluded without their participation.

The preliminary agreement reached in Skhirat in July does envision “interim security arrangements” that would form the basis for a nationwide ceasefire and the phased withdrawal of armed groups and militias from towns and cities across Libya. Yet negotiations on the “security track” have suffered several serious shortcomings, and have remained limited in scope and results so far.

While the UN support mission, UNSMIL, has conducted a series of preparatory meetings with Libyan security actors, especially among the leaders of Tripoli's most influential armed groups, no broad dialogue between opposing military factions has taken place. In addition, the two main military coalitions – the so-called Libyan National Army led by General Hifter, and the Libya Dawn alliance made of armed groups from Misrata, Gharyan, Zawiya and Tripoli – as well as Islamist-leaning formations, have each become increasingly fragmented over time, with unclear chains of command, and no real control by politicians over the military.

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The military actors who have engaged in talks did so separately, without coordination and sometimes in rivalry with politicians. Little coordination has been ensured between the political and security tracks in the UN-led negotiation process, mostly because of a lack of resources and capacity. The parties have therefore been reluctant to engage in the security talks and commit to any concrete action as long as there is no political agreement. Moreover, the current design of the negotiations implies that they will have no formal influence on the outcome of the negotiations in the political track.

UNSMIL's interlocutors for discussions on the security arrangements have also been largely confined to discussions with the parties directly in conflict on the ground. Yet recent positive developments in western Libya (particularly the conclusion of local ceasefires and prisoner exchanges) have shown that genuine achievements on security issues are more easily reached (and are more sustainable) when neutral but influential third parties are directly involved in the talks. As ideas and scenarios are circulated to push forward discussions on interim security arrangements in Tripoli, stronger engagement with neutral forces might prove key.

Discussions have recently focused on the possibility of forming a third, neutral force entrusted with securing Tripoli. This force would displace the rival forces allied respectively with Misrata and Zintan that dominated the city after 2011, and which were involved in direct armed confrontation during summer 2014. Such a neutral force might be composed of units from towns and communities that have not been directly part of the 2014 confrontation, that support the political agreement, and that have the military might to exert pressure on the rival coalitions - provided that they are legitimated and strongly backed by the parties to the political accord and Libya's international partners. In eastern Tripoli, in particular, one key challenge would be the reaction of the most extremist Islamist armed formations, and the way this third force would be able to address the challenge they represent.

Beyond the objective of securing Tripoli, especially principal government buildings and state institutions, this new force could also constitute the nucleus for the new regular army, as it would mix together small groups of revolutionary fighters (*thuwar*) and regular soldiers (mostly officers who joined the revolution and subsequently did not return to military service) under new command and control structures.

The experience of the "Nafusa Military Room" (*ghurfat nafusa al-'askariyya*), deployed in recent months in southern and south-western Tripoli, might prove an interesting test in this regard. Headed by Colonel Mohamed Shibun, previously an Air Force officer, this body is currently composed of units from cities in the Nafusa Mountains, and is directed by a military

council of 20 officers from this region, mixing together military defectors and revolutionary fighters.

The conception of such a security framework is undoubtedly challenging. It has to take into account the obvious sensitivity in western Libya towards integrating former military officers in the new army. It also raises key questions regarding the structures of command and control for the new body, to avoid replicating the experience of 2012-2013, when all competing factions within the government and GNC were building their own military networks and channels by controlling key positions such as Chief of Staff, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior.

Yet for Libya's international partners, work on such a scenario involving robust but neutral third forces from within the country, and commitment to support its actual implementation, might be the best option in the current context. Recent developments in western Libya have shown how homegrown solutions involving local actors who are considered neutral and influential are better suited to solving the country's political and security crisis, at least with regards to western Libya. In contrast, the idea, regularly evoked, of a new foreign military intervention aimed at guaranteeing security arrangements in Tripoli might prove both dangerous and difficult to implement, as it could result in further security deterioration and increased jihadist activity.

About the author

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