



# **United States Institute of Peace**

## **“The Conflict in Libya”**

**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International  
Terrorism**

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## Introduction

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Libya. The timing for this hearing is especially important given the escalation in violence in Libya over the past five weeks and the bleak prospects for a peaceful solution in the near future.

I am the Senior Program Officer for North Africa at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. USIP was established by Congress as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values. The inability to end peacefully Libya's post-Gaddafi transition has resulted in violence, allowed terrorists and traffickers to operate with near impunity, and created a conduit for irregular migration into Europe – posing a significant security challenge to the strategic interests of the U.S. and our allies.

My testimony today is distilled into three points:

1. A permanent political solution is not possible if external actors and nation-states continue to intervene in Libya in ways that prioritize their own interests over those of the Libyan people.
2. The peace process led by the United Nations has failed. The causes of that failure are numerous and open for debate but the outcome itself is not. It is appropriate to conclude that the United Nations never had the authority necessary to restrain external and internal spoilers and no longer enjoys the requisite credibility with the Libyan people to broker a lasting peace.
3. The United States and other “P5” countries can and should play a role in bringing Libya's conflict to resolution through high-level diplomatic engagement and applied pressure on those states and actors that violate United Nations resolutions related to arms transfers and the protection of civilians.<sup>1</sup>

## External Actors

The popular movement that challenged and ultimately overthrew Muammar Gaddafi was greatly aided by – and would have been unsuccessful without – the intervention of NATO forces and the support of the United Nations.<sup>2</sup> NATO states (led by France and the United Kingdom) and non-NATO allies, like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, aligned against Gaddafi and implemented the UN-authorized “no-fly” zone.<sup>3</sup> These external actors provided anti-Gaddafi groups with critical financial and military support, laying the foundation for the patron-client relationships that persist in Libya today.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Security Council. 26 February 2011. [Resolution 1970](#); United Nations Security Council. 27 August 2014. [Resolution 2174](#); United Nations Security Council. 14 June 2016. [Resolution 2292](#); United Nations Security Council. 12 June 2017. [Resolution 2357](#); United Nations Security Council. 11 June 2018. [Resolution 2420](#)

<sup>2</sup> Alan Kuperman “Obama’s Libya Debauché” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2015

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2019-02-18/obamas-libya-debauché>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Security Council. 17 March 2011. *Resolution 1973* [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1973\(2011\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1973(2011))

Following Gaddafi's death October 2011, all states that participated in the NATO alliance intervention publicly pledged to support the United Nations and its mandate to facilitate Libya's transition.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, a Joint Communiqué on Libya, signed by Egypt, Italy, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and others, reaffirmed "our commitment to the United Nations Support Mission in Libya's efforts under the leadership of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General."<sup>5</sup> The European Union, African Union, the League of Arab States, and United Nations issued a joint statement in 2017 reaffirming their support for the UN's coordination role and leadership.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, since 2011, external actors continued to provide military and financial support to their Libyan proxies, in contravention to United Nations Security Council resolutions, undermining UN mediation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Rivalries that had been set aside in the effort to oust Gaddafi resurfaced as states have sought to advance narrow self-interests, often at the expense of one another. Divisions within Libyan society were exacerbated and exploited by external actors who found Libyan partners willing to prioritize personal gain over national unity. As these regional proxy battles and competition for control over Libyan resources have played out over the last eight years, it has been the Libyan people that have paid the largest cost.

### ***Regional rival interventions***

The UAE and Qatar participated in Operation Unified Protector, the NATO-led mission, sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, to protect civilians in Libya.<sup>8</sup> However, this alliance was one of convenience and perceived necessity. The two countries have a well-documented history of tension made worse by their respective entanglements in the revolutions of Egypt and Syria.<sup>9</sup> These tensions reportedly boiled over into a near military confrontation as recently as June 2017, a disaster only avoided after the intervention of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.<sup>10</sup> In lieu of direct military conflict, Libya became one of the battlegrounds where this regional conflict materialized.

The United Nations identified the external regional actors engaged in the Libyan conflict into two groups: one comprising Chad, Egypt, and the UAE; the second, including Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan.<sup>11</sup> Saudi Arabia could also be reasonably included in the same group with Egypt and the UAE. It would be an overstatement to describe these groupings as alliances since each country has its own unique justifications for engagement in Libya. Instead, it would be more

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council. 14 March 2014. [Resolution 2144](#).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Support Mission in Libya, "Joint Communiqué on Libya" 22 September 2016 <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/joint-communication-libya>

<sup>6</sup> European Union External Action, "Meeting of the Libya Quartet: Joint Communiqué" May 23, 2017 [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communique\\_libya\\_quartet\\_meeting\\_23\\_may\\_2017.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communique_libya_quartet_meeting_23_may_2017.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Security Council, letter dated 15 February 2013 from the Panel of Experts on Libya. [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2013\\_99.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_99.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO and Libya" 9 November 2015 [https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/topics\\_71652.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/topics_71652.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli eds., *Foreign Actors Inside Libya's Crisis*. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2017. [https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/LIBIA\\_2017/LIBIA\\_WEB.DEF.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/LIBIA_2017/LIBIA_WEB.DEF.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Alex Emmons, "Saudi Arabia Planned to Invade Qatar Last Summer. Rex Tillerson's Efforts to Stop It May Have Cost Him His Job." *The Intercept* August 1, 2018 <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/rex-tillerson-qatar-saudi-uae/>

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, letter dated 1 June 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Libya. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2017/466>

accurate to describe these countries as working in parallel lines of effort that frequently are mutually beneficial and, at times, coordinated.

Following the military coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, tensions between two sides increased significantly. President Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood party had been supported by Qatar; military intervention was supported by other Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The resulting escalation in tension led to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain recalling their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014.<sup>12</sup> It was at this same time in Libya that General Khalifa Haftar and his Libya National Army (LNA) launched a military campaign (Operation Dignity) “to rid Benghazi of Islamist and Jihadist militias,” groups frequently seen as synonymous with the Muslim Brotherhood by the governments of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

With the support of Egypt and the UAE, Field Marshal Haftar assaulted the city of Benghazi for three years before finally declaring victory. Benghazi was left in ruins but Field Marshal Haftar was able to declare victory over the Islamists that had been there, demonstrating his usefulness to his supporters in Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. In addition to providing military and financial support to the LNA, Egypt and the UAE conducted their own military assaults in Libya.<sup>14</sup> Qatar and Turkey did not support Operation Dignity and instead doubled-down in support of the General National Congress (GNC) and its Libya Dawn coalition that included Muslim Brotherhood affiliates.

In December 2015, the Libya Political Agreement (LPA) was signed in Skirhat, Morocco. The agreement committed all parties to a “unified governance structures under a Government of National Accord [GNA].”<sup>15</sup> With the support of the United Nations, the governments of Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar all publicly recognized the Government of National Accord as “the sole legitimate government of Libya, with Prime Minister Fayeze Serraj as the leader of the Presidency Council.”<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, all of these external actors continued to provide support to their various proxies inside Libya and undermine the United Nations’ efforts. Since 2015, both Egypt and the UAE (as well as others) have attempted to orchestrate talks between Field Marshal Haftar and his GNA counterpart, Fayeze Serraj, reportedly at the official invitation of the United Nations Special Representatives of the Secretary General (SRSG). Many have questioned how these efforts by the Egyptian and Emirati governments are consistent with United Nations resolutions that call for Member States to work with the SRSG to develop “a coordinated” approach to Libya. Egypt hosted talks in February 2017; the UAE hosted talks in May 2017 and again in February 2019.

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Gardner, “Gulf ambassadors pulled from Qatar over ‘interference’.” BBC 5 March 2014  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26447914>

<sup>13</sup> Fred Wehrey, “Whoever Controls Benghazi Controls Libya.” *The Atlantic* 1 July 2017  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/benghazi-libya/532056/>

<sup>14</sup> David Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, “Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.” *The New York Times* 25 August 2014  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html>

<sup>15</sup> Libyan Political Agreement. 17 December 2015  
<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Security Council. 13 September 2018. [Resolution 2434](#); United Nations Security Council. 23 December 2015. [Resolution 2259](#)

All of these efforts failed to resolve the political stalemate and arguably undermined the credibility of the United Nations.

In April 2019, Field Marshal Haftar and his LNA forces launched an assault on Tripoli and the internationally recognized Libyan leadership (GNA). In Egypt, a government spokesman stated “[President Sisi] affirmed Egypt’s support in efforts to fight terrorism and extremist militias to achieve security and stability for Libyan citizens throughout the country.”<sup>17</sup> Emirati Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash posted a Tweet saying the “*priority in Libya [is] to counter extremism/terrorism & stability in long drawn out crisis. Abudhabi agreement offered opportunity to support UN led process. Meanwhile extremist militias continue to control Capital & derail search for political solution.*”<sup>18</sup> Noticeably absent from either statement is a call for an immediate ceasefire or a condemnation of the escalation in violence.

### ***European interventions***

The regional proxy war being fought in Libya between Arab states is further complicated by the unhelpful intervention of several European states, including France and Italy. France and Italy have colonial ties to North Africa; Libya was an Italian colony for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Libya’s close proximity to Europe and vast energy resources have made it an important economic partner for both France and Italy.

In the months leading up to the start of NATO’s Operation Unified Protector campaign, France was outspoken in favor of military action in Libya.<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom and France – with the support of the United States – pushed for the United Nations resolution which authorized Member States to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya, protect civilians, enforce an arms embargo, and apply sanctions against Libyan officials.<sup>20</sup> But following the conclusion of NATO’s military campaign in October 2011, European countries played a less active role in Libya than previously mentioned Arab states. European engagement was largely limited to diplomacy and aid programs, notably the Friends of Libya effort.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, however, European posture towards Libya began to change.

In 2014, violence in Libya spiked and European countries were forced to recall their ambassadors. Fighting in Libya occupied the attention of Libya’s meager border security apparatus allowing historical migration routes to Europe to expand, prompting a migration crisis by 2015. More than one million migrants crossed into Europe in 2015; thousands died in transit across the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup> For decades, European governments had paid Gaddafi to moderate irregular migration flows into Europe. In 2008, the European Union paid \$500 million to the government of Libya to stop the flow of migrants – many from sub-Saharan Africa – into Europe, eventually providing Col. Gaddafi with an aid package of \$5 billion over 20 years “to

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Wintour, “Libya crisis: Egypt’s Sisi back Haftar assault on Tripoli.” *The Guardian* 14 April 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/14/libya-crisis-egypt-sisi-backs-haftar-assault-on-tripoli>

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/AnwarGargash/status/1123825744256405505>

<sup>19</sup> Fred Wehrey, *The Burning Shores* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. 41

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Security Council. 13 September 2018. [Resolution 1973](https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/20180913.res1973.shtml).

<sup>21</sup> Press Statement by French Embassy in Canada, Friends of Libya Conference. 23 August 2011. <https://ca.ambafrance.org/Friends-of-Libya-conference>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

right the wrongs of colonialism, on the condition that [Col. Gaddafi] kept a tight grip on the border.”<sup>23</sup>

The surge in irregular migration into Europe prompted France and Italy in particular to take a more “hands on” approach. Publicly, France and Italy helped push competing Libyan factions to negotiate the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in Skirhat, Morocco in 2015.<sup>24</sup> Less publicly, France did not oppose Field Marshal Haftar’s Operation Dignity military campaign, presumably because Field Marshal Haftar was seen by Paris as a strongman who could help close Libya’s migration routes into Europe.

French support for Field Marshal Haftar continued into 2015 and 2016, providing “decisive military support to Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), which allowed the renegade general to gain control of most of Benghazi and ultimately transform from a marginalized outcast into a key stakeholder.”<sup>25</sup> France has not denied its support for Field Marshal Haftar but instead has suggested that its support is not in favor of one Libyan faction over another. However, since 2015, France has provided the LNA with military advisers, clandestine operatives, and special force units – elements not provided to the GNA.<sup>26</sup>

French interests in Libya increased following the ISIS terrorist truck attack in Nice, France in July 2016. After three French Special Forces soldiers were killed in Libya later that month, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drain admitted that France was militarily supporting Field Marshal Haftar.<sup>27</sup> While official French press statements continued to promote the United Nations-led process, President Macron held high-profile but ultimately fruitless peace talks in 2017 and 2018 with Prime Minister Serraj and Field Marshal Haftar that served to undermine the UN’s credibility.

As recently as September 2018, France publicly supported the GNA “as the sole legitimate government of Libya, with Prime Minister Fayez Serraj as the leader of the Presidency Council.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, France blocked EU efforts to condemn Field Marshal Haftar’s military assault on the GNA in Tripoli and instead called for a ceasefire but not the withdrawal of LNA forces.<sup>29</sup> In response, the GNA has declared that it will no longer engage in bilateral discussions with France.<sup>30</sup>

Italy’s intervention in Libya has been less destructive than that of France but arguably still unhelpful. The competition between France and Italy has frequently spilled into open

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<sup>23</sup> MSNBC. <http://www.msnbc.com/specials/migrant-crisis/libya>

<sup>24</sup> Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli eds., *Foreign Actors Inside Libya’s Crisis*. Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2017. [https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/LIBIA\\_2017/LIBIA\\_WEB.DEF.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/LIBIA_2017/LIBIA_WEB.DEF.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jalel Harchaoui, “How France is Making Libya Worse” *Foreign Affairs* 21 September 2017 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2017-09-21/how-france-making-libya-worse>

<sup>27</sup> <http://en.rfi.fr/africa/20160720-france-admits-special-forces-soldiers-killed-libya>

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Security Council. 13 September 2018. [Resolution 2434](https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/res2434.docstxt)

<sup>29</sup> Gabriela Baczyńska and Francesco Guarascio, “France blocks EU call to stop Haftar’s offensive in Libya.” *Reuters* 10 April 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-eu-tajani/france-blocks-eu-call-to-stop-haftars-offensive-in-libya-idUSKCN1RM1DO>; and, Rym Momtaz, “Libyan military advances get European backing.” *Politico* 10 May 2019 <https://www.politico.eu/article/libya-conflict-civil-war-haftar-sarraj/>

<sup>30</sup> France24. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190418-libya-france-end-cooperation-haftar-warrant>

accusations and recriminations.<sup>31</sup> These tensions have only increased following the election of Italy's populist government which has taken a very tough stance towards immigration and the EU.<sup>32</sup>

In November 2018, the Italians hosted a conference in Palermo which brought together many of the same actors who attended the Paris Summit just six months earlier. Some observers dismissed the Palermo Conference as little more than a publicity stunt intended to prevent France from being seen as the driving force for peace in Libya. Whatever the Italian intention, the Palermo Conference had the effect of once again undermining the United Nations.

The Italian government has significant interests in the Libyan energy sector through Eni.<sup>33</sup> Domestically, the flow of irregular migrants into Italy is perceived as a major national security threat, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment. Unlike the French, the Italians have consistently backed forces based in Libya's west (and Tripoli), largely because Tripoli is the primary point of departure for migrants headed to Italy and it is the seat of the major economic interests. As the French have increasingly backed Field Marshal Haftar, Italy has sought to shore up support for the GNA. Earlier this month, Italy's Prime Minister Conte hosted Fayeze Serraj in Rome.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Russian interventions***

Russia has been engaged in Libya for several years, albeit not to the same degree as European or Arab states. Since at least 2016, Russia has been printing Libyan banknotes for the unrecognized Central Bank of Libya, affiliated with Field Marshal Haftar's supporters.<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly, this has created financial difficulties for average Libyans.<sup>36</sup> The Wagner Group, Russian mercenaries supported by Russian military intelligence, have been operating inside Libya for several years, including sending a reported 300 soldiers into Benghazi to support the LNA.<sup>37</sup> Russia has reportedly also established at least two forward operating bases inside Libya.

In 2017, Field Marshal Haftar made a public appearance on a Russian aircraft carrier parked off the Libyan coastline and visited Moscow in November 2018 to meet with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. In early May, it was reported that high ranking aides to Field Marshal Haftar were in Moscow, presumably to lock in support for his assault on Tripoli. According to

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<sup>31</sup> Crispian Balmer, "Italy's Salvini bashes France over Libya role in new diplomatic spat." *Reuters* 22 January 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-italy-salvini/italys-salvini-bashes-france-over-libya-role-in-new-diplomatic-spat-idUSKCN1PG0QI>

<sup>32</sup> Federica Saini Fasanotti and Ben Fishman, "How France and Italy's Rivalry Is Hurting Libya." *Foreign Affairs* 31 October 2018

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2018-10-31/how-france-and-italys-rivalry-hurting-libya>

<sup>33</sup> Ahmad Ghaddar and Ron Bousso, "Eni to acquire half of BP's Libya oil and gas assets." *Reuters* 8 October 2018

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-libya-bp-eni/eni-to-acquire-half-of-bps-libya-oil-and-gas-assets-idUSKCN1MI1RP>

<sup>34</sup> Niccolo Magnani, "Libya, Conte-Al Serraj Interview" *Il Sussidiario*. 7 May 2019

<https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/esteri/libia-vertice-conte-al-serraj-presto-vedro-haftar-premier-tripoli-in-tour-ue/1879950/>

<sup>35</sup> RT. <https://www.rt.com/business/344475-libya-prints-banknotes-russia/>

<sup>36</sup> Aidan Lewis, "Separate banknotes symbols of Libyan disunity, financial disarray." *Reuters* 3 June 2016.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-economy/separate-banknotes-symbols-of-libyan-disunity-financial-disarray-idUSKCN0YP156>

<sup>37</sup> Alec Luhn and Dominic Nicholls, "Russian mercenaries back Libyan rebel leader as Moscow seeks influence in Africa." *The Telegraph UK*. 3 March 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-economy/separate-banknotes-symbols-of-libyan-disunity-financial-disarray-idUSKCN0YP156>

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, Russia's policy in Libya is "to not bet on any one party" and hedge its bets by simultaneously backing multiple conflicting parties.<sup>38</sup>

Russian interests in Libya are part of a larger regional strategy to monitor NATO's southern coastline activities, isolate Europe from Africa, and control the southern Mediterranean region. Russia already has military bases in Syria, Egypt and now in Libya; talks with Algeria have been reported. Russia has economic interests in Libya as well. It's been reported that Russia is seeking reconstruction contracts with the intent on building a new naval base in Libya.<sup>39</sup>

### ***U.S. interventions***

The United States has shown little interest in Libya since the Obama administration's support for NATO military engagement. The reported strategy of "leading from behind" in Libya has prioritized the role of the United Nations, a strategy that the United States doubled-down on following the assassination of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in 2012. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have seen the Libya conflict as largely a European problem where U.S. equities are limited. The United States sent a low-level delegation to the meetings in Paris and Palermo in 2018.

USAFRICOM has identified Libya as one of its four lines of effort but the strategy of "by, with, and through" places a premium on regional partnerships which have been slow to materialize in the Libyan context. As a result, the U.S. strategy continues to be to respond kinetically to terrorist threats and publicly support the United Nations. Following a reported call between President Trump and Field Marshal Haftar this past month, some have questioned if the U.S. strategy has been influenced by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.<sup>40</sup>

### **Plan A: United Nations in the lead**

When the NATO military campaign in Libya ended in October 2011, the United Nations established the Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to support the country's transition to an elected government. None of the countries that participated in Operation Unified Protector wanted to own the project of reconstructing Libya and so the United Nations was charged with the responsibility of managing Libya's post-Gaddafi transition.

Importantly, UNSMIL is neither a peacekeeping nor humanitarian mission; it is a political mission. UNSMIL's mandate is to exercise mediation and good offices in support of the implementation of any political agreement(s). Only upon request can UNSMIL provide essential services or humanitarian assistance; these are provided through IOM and UNDP.

Proposals to insert a peacekeeping mission in Libya in 2011 were met with resistance by Libyans who believed that they were capable of resolving their own conflicts and feared foreign

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Mediation Goals in Libya." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* 18 April 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78940>

<sup>39</sup> Henry Meyer, Samer Al-Atrush and Stepan Kravchenko. "Russia has a Plan for Libya – Another Qaddafi." *Bloomberg* 19 December 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-20/russia-has-a-plan-for-libya-another-qaddafi>

<sup>40</sup> Vivian Salama, Jared Malsin, Summer Said. "Trump Backed Libyan Warlord After Saudi Arabia and Egypt Lobbied Him." *The Wall Street Journal*. 12 May 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-backed-libyan-warlord-after-saudi-arabia-and-egypt-lobbied-him-11557668581>



intervention.<sup>41</sup> The continuation of violence has prompted renewed calls for the introduction of “a modest international force for very specific security-related purposes.”<sup>42</sup> Such proposals continue to be unsupported by the majority of Libyans.

From its outset, UNSMIL has been undermined by external actors (see above) and had its credibility challenged by political miscalculations, institutional dysfunction, and scandals involving successive Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs). UNSMIL had six envoys in its first six years. The third envoy, Tarek Mitri, was in charge during the critical period leading up to the escalation in violence in 2014. In interviews since his resignation, Mitri has lamented that the UN rushed elections in 2012, and “the election made the power struggle take precedence over the state-building process. Building the state should have preceded the struggle for power.”<sup>43</sup> Under Mitri, UNSMIL was also criticized for having no one on staff with expertise in reforming security institutions.<sup>44</sup>

Mitri was replaced in 2014 by Spaniard Bernardino Leon. Leon’s tenure ended after emails surfaced exposing Leon’s efforts to secure a high-paying position in the UAE. Leon resigned as SRSG in 2015 and has since taken a position in the Emirates as the director general of a diplomatic academy.<sup>45</sup> At the very least, Leon’s connections with the Emiratis raised questions about UNSMIL’s neutrality for many Libyans.

German Martin Kobler was then tapped to be SRSG. Kobler was ultimately pushed out after meeting with Petroleum Facilities Guard leader Ibrahim Jadran, a move seen by many – including members of the National Oil Corporation (NOC) – as legitimizing a warlord.<sup>46</sup> Kobler was accused of facilitating a deal with Jadran whereby the Tripoli-based Presidency Council would allow Jadran to control certain oil facilities in return for recognition.<sup>47</sup> The deal was seen by many as UNSMIL appeasement of a criminal.

By 2017, Kobler was under increasing scrutiny for having overseen the failed implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Initially, former Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyed was chosen to replace Kobler but his candidacy was scuttled due to opposition from other Member States. Kobler was replaced in June 2017 by Lebanese academic Ghassan Salamé.

Initial support for Salamé began to unravel as Salamé was unable to deliver significant progress towards ending the Libyan conflict. Salamé’s ability to mediate between Field Marshal Haftar

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<sup>41</sup> Fred Wehrey, *The Burning Shores* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. 101

<sup>42</sup> “Empowered decentralization: A city-based strategy for rebuilding Libya.” *Brookings* 11 February 2019 [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP\\_20190228\\_libya.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190228_libya.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Randa Takieddine. “Former UN envoy: Libya held its elections too soon.” *Al-Monitor* 12 October 2014 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/10/httpahayatcomarticles4939912-----.html>

<sup>44</sup> Fred Wehrey, *The Burning Shores* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. 100

<sup>45</sup> Randeep Ramesh. “UN Libya envoy accepts £1,000-a-day job from backer of one side in civil war” *The Guardian* 4 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/un-libya-envoy-accepts-1000-a-day-job-from-backer-of-one-side-in-civil-war>

<sup>46</sup> Sami Zaptia. “‘Dismayed’ Tripoli NOC chairman Sanalla slams UNSMIL’s Kobler as ‘ignorant’ for meeting ‘criminal’ Jadran.” *The Libya Herald* 24 July 2016. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/07/24/dismayed-tripoli-noc-chairman-sanalla-slams-unsmil-kobler-as-ignorant-for-meeting-criminal/>

<sup>47</sup> Claudia Gazzini. “After Libya’s oil grab, compromise could lead to a restart of exports.” *The International Crisis Group* 14 September 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/after-libyas-oil-grab-compromise-could-lead-restart-exports>

and Faye Serraj was undermined by repeated diplomatic conferences and negotiations hosted by France, Italy, Egypt, and the UAE (listed above). International pressure on Salamé increased as Field Marshal Haftar's LNA started its military offensive through southern Libya in January 2019. Reports that Field Marshal Haftar planned to assault Tripoli had circulated since at least December 2018. Salamé pressed for a political solution and announced that UNSMIL would host a long-awaited National Conference in Ghadames, Libya between April 12-13. This proved to be the proverbial breaking point for UNSMIL's credibility for Libyans.

Field Marshal Haftar launched his military offensive against the GNA ten days before UNSMIL's National Conference, ending hopes of a political solution in the foreseeable future. That Field Marshal Haftar attacked Tripoli while SRSG Salamé and UN Secretary General António Guterres were in Libya, further demonstrated the irrelevance of the SRSG and the United Nations to Libyans. Since the start of Field Marshal Haftar's April campaign, France, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United States have all signaled that Field Marshal Haftar's aggression will be tolerated and accepted rather than condemned.

Many Libyans have lost faith in UNSMIL and no longer see it as a credible institution capable of bringing peace to Libya.

### **Plan B: After the United Nations**

If "Plan A" was to allow the United Nations to resolve the Libyan conflict, that experiment has failed. The United Nations was not able to constrain external actors who frequently sought to advance narrow self-interest at the expense of peace and stability in Libya. The United Nations was not given the resources or mandate necessary to fulfill its charge; in retrospect, a political mission did not have the coercive power to constrain internal spoilers and external actors.

Four weeks after Field Marshal Haftar's advance on Tripoli ended all hope of a UN-led peace process, it now seems clear that the LNA does not have the strength to take Tripoli without a significant influx of military and financial support from external actors and at great cost and humanitarian suffering to the people of Tripoli.

General Thomas Waldhauser, Commander of the United States Africa Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2017 that "[t]he instability in Libya and North Africa may be the most significant, near-term threat to U.S. and allies' interests on the continent."<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, the situation in Libya has deteriorated significantly since General Waldhauser's testimony and his warning is all the more exigent. A political solution to the Libyan conflict remains the best possible outcome and while other international actors can play an important role, the United States is uniquely placed to play a constructive role.

Precisely because the United States has remained largely disconnected from the Libyan conflict since 2012, the United States is now still perceived as an honest broker by many Libyans. This does not mean that the United States is obligated or even should entertain the possibility of shouldering the responsibility for resolving Libya's conflict. However, the United States does have the convening power to bring various internal and external actors together and apply

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<sup>48</sup> Testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee. 9 March 2017. [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser\\_03-09-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser_03-09-17.pdf)

pressure against potential spoilers. The United States has considerable diplomatic capacity to organize a process that leads to a peaceful transition in Libya.

Today, the United States enjoys good relations with all the relevant external actors (Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France, and Italy). The United States has already demonstrated its capacity to resolve crises in Libya, as it did in mid-2018 when the United States was able to resolve the Libyan Oil Crescent conflict and reopen critical oil spigots, allowing Libya to access necessary foreign currency.

The Trump administration has not identified a Special Envoy for Libya following the departure of Jonathan Winer in January 2017. My testimony does not advocate for the naming of a new Special Envoy for Libya as others have argued. There are many capable people already employed at the Department of State and in roles where they could lead a renewed U.S. engagement in Libya. However, it is critical that the United States signal its sincerity by sending appropriate senior-level delegations to international meetings on Libya. The recent practice of sending mid-level officers denotes a lack of interest and appreciation for the seriousness of the national security threats that emanate from chaos in Libya.

The Libyan people have expressed a desire for reconciliation and an end to the post-Gaddafi transition period; it is their leaders and external actors that have refused to hear this message. The U.S. Institute of Peace is working with civil society in southern Libya and it is clear that these historically marginalized communities long for peace and stability. They reject the criminal elements and terrorists that have taken root in the country.

Absent U.S. leadership to corral the internal and external actors operating inside Libya today, it is unlikely that the current stand-off between the Field Marshal Haftar and anti-Haftar forces in Tripoli can be resolved without significant costs to the unarmed civilian population. Such a bloodbath will create a new flood of irregular migrants into Europe and provide terrorist groups with an opportunity to exploit Libya's ungoverned spaces.

Former U.S. Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley was correct when she warned that “[t]hose that pursue a military solution will wind up helping terrorist groups that thrive on instability.”<sup>49</sup>

*The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*

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<sup>49</sup> Ambassador Nikki Haley, “Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Libya” 17 January 2018. <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/8254>