

Libya: A New False Dawn

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Albert Einstein once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. That quote is worth bearing in mind when assessing the chances of the latest United Nations peace plan for Libya.

Every autumn, along with the falling leaves, comes a new UN plan for ending Libya's civil war, now into its fourth year.

Like the plans before it, the current version of the United Nations Support Mission for Libya has superficial attractions.

It proposes a new slimmed-down version of the government the UN itself installed in Tripoli two years ago, cutting the number of its presidency from nine members to three, one chosen from each of the country's three regions.

The elected parliament in Tobruk voted yes to it this week, and there were encouraging signs from its rival, unelected, parliament, the State Council in Tripoli. Cue optimistic words from the new UN envoy, Ghassan Salame, to the United Nations Security Council – his boss – earlier this month about how the peace process is advancing.

But the reality is, it ain't going to work.

And it ain't going to work for the same reason that all the previous UN peace plans didn't work.

The most obvious reason why it will not work is right there in the UN plan: The three-strong presidency needs to be agreed by a grand council of all Libya's factions, expected to be called by the UN in February, which will also decide a date for new elections. But if all Libya's factions could agree a way forward, there would never have been a civil war in the first place.

That is reality behind the superficial optimism that greeted the yes-vote to the new presidency by Tobruk – Libya's only governing group that was actually elected.

The UN's powerlessness was exposed two weeks ago, when Tobruk refused to let a UN plane, bringing western Libyan MPs to the parliament, was refused permission to land. The UN greeted this with a meek protest, and nothing more. Outside powers have other things to think about, and there was no Big Power heft to push Tobruk to change its mind.

The reality is that the country remains in political turmoil.

In the east, supporters of Tobruk's army commander, Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar, have begun a petition for him to be declared Libyan President. This likely will not work and the Field Marshall himself knows it is not necessary. After his successful operations against Islamists, clearing them from Benghazi, Libya's second city, he has a fair chance of walking it to victory if Libya held a Presidential election.

With Benghazi free, the city is shrugging off three years of battle. Flights and shipping are being transferred from Tobruk, at Libya's eastern extremity, back to Benghazi. Oil is flowing from the Sirte Basin, where the country's oil wealth is concentrated.

Tripoli, meanwhile, is undergoing more and more deportations: The militias who control the streets fight each other, kidnappings are endemic, and citizens are humiliated by having to line up for hours to withdraw paltry sums of money from state banks just to survive. All of which is an indictment on the Tripoli government which, despite UN backing, has failed to impose itself.

In other words, eastern Libya is humming, and will not bend its knee to any UN plan not to its liking. Outside powers are also disunited. France and Italy both had strategies, Italy backing the Tripoli rulers, France Tobruk. Russia has also signaled support for Tobruk, enjoying warm relations with Haftar, though formally all three states endorse the "UN process."

The wild card is the United States. The Trump administration has kept its distance from Libya, with Trump himself declaring the US has "no interest" in the country.

That may be changing. This month Libya's oil chief Mustafa Sanallah and, reportedly, a member of Haftar's entourage, were both in Houston to meet Trump's Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. The location of the meetings was important: Tillerson is an oil man, the former chief executive of Exxon, and Houston is also the HQ of American oil companies who have a presence in eastern Libya. The companies are keen to see production get going again, and Haftar's advisors are keen to remind them that, since capturing the Sirte Basin from assorted militias a year back, the general has allowed the oil to flow unlike the militias who held it to ransom.

In the end, Libya's war is likely to be settled by old fashioned great-powers moves, not the illusionary plans of the disrespected UN.

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