

How a European diplomatic offensive can unite Libyans against ISIS

By Mattia Toaldo

In December 2015, Libya's rival factions signed a deal to set up a unity government. The Libyan Political Agreement was the product of a long process of mediation, led by the United Nations mission in Libya (UNSMIL) with European support. The new Government of National Accord was established in Tripoli on 30 March.

The unity government is the best chance for stability in Libya, but it is currently suffering from two sets of problems:

1. **Domestic:** Forces loyal to military strongman General Khalifa Heftar, who has refused to recognise the unity government or work under it, are building parallel state institutions in eastern Libya. These include an army; a "Central Bank", which has printed its own banknotes; a "National Oil Company", which has tried to sell oil through an intermediary based in the United Arab Emirates; and a rival government, led by Abdullah al-Thinni.
2. **External:** Some of Europe's allies in the region, particularly Egypt and the UAE, are supporting these parallel forces, both politically and by delivering weapons in violation of the UN arms embargo. Russia's attitude towards the unity government is ambivalent at best, as demonstrated by its printing of banknotes for the rival "Central Bank".

The House of Representatives – the parliament based in eastern Libya – is responsible for implementing the deal through a vote of confidence for the unity government. But because of these domestic and external problems, the House has stalled. A minority of MPs, influenced by General Heftar and with political and practical support both from Egypt and the UAE, are effectively blocking the body from operating.

Meanwhile, General Heftar has refused to pledge loyalty to the unity government, and has publicly rejected an invitation to meet with UN Special Representative Martin Kobler. The general had stated that he would

Host partners



Sponsors



LONDON
PARIS
MADRID BERLIN
ROME WARSAW
SOFIA



ECFR ANNUAL COUNCIL MEETING

27-28 June 2016

#ECFR16

move independently against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Sirte, but it is the forces loyal to the unity government that have conquered most of the territory lost by ISIS in Libya in the last month.

Despite the rout of ISIS from Sirte in early June, it will become increasingly difficult to rule the country and maintain its territorial integrity without coordination between Heftar's forces and unity government troops. The anarchy and violence that has fed ISIS could help it regain ground or lead to the rise of new violent actors who are just as dangerous for Libya and for Europe. Ultimately, Europe should focus on the patient (Libya) and not just on the disease (ISIS).

Europe's role so far

Political unity among Libyans is essential for a successful fight against ISIS in the country. To this end, Europe should launch a diplomatic offensive that is just as intense – if not more so – as the one that led to the political agreement.

In 2015, European Union High Representative Federica Mogherini, along with several EU member states (the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Malta) joined several initiatives that coordinated United States and European pressure on Libyan factions and on relevant regional powers. This was decisive in pushing moderates from different camps to sign the agreement.

A few days before the deal was finalised, these countries, along with the EU, the US, and regional powers, gathered in Rome to sign a declaration in support of the unity government, under the name of the International Support Group for Libya. They vowed to deal exclusively with the unity government, and to end all contact with rival institutions. The group met again in Vienna in May 2016 and approved a more detailed statement. They invited the unity government to request an exemption to the UN Security Council arms embargo on Libya, in order to fight ISIS; they pushed for the creation of a joint military command that would include all the country's armed groups; they committed to blocking any attempts to establish parallel economic institutions; and they offered training for the Libyan coastguard.

Host partners



Sponsors



LONDON
PARIS
MADRID BERLIN
ROME WARSAW
SOFIA

On this point, the EU Foreign Affairs Council has offered to upgrade Operation Sophia to include enforcement of the UN arms embargo, a crucial contribution to de-escalating the conflict in Libya.

What next?

Now, Europe should step up its efforts to overcome the challenges to the unity government's authority, which are essentially political, and which have been exacerbated by some EU allies in the Middle East and North Africa. This European initiative should tackle the domestic and external drivers of disunity on several fronts, in close coordination with the UN mission in Libya.

- **Fight parallel institutions:** Extend EU sanctions to individuals who are aiding the rival economic institutions in eastern Libya, or selling oil for them, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions to protect Libya's economic institutions.
- **Promote decentralisation:** Pressure Prime Minister Faiez Serraj to offer decentralisation to disloyal forces in eastern Libya. This should include the economic institutions, which, while still remaining under the control of the unity government in Tripoli, could set up additional headquarters in the east.
- **Push for a military joint command:** Offer logistical and strategic assistance for the formation of a military joint command to fight ISIS, under the control of the Defence Ministry.
- **Enforce the arms embargo:** Continue to enforce the arms embargo as set out at the Vienna summit, either through Operation Sophia (as stated in the Foreign Affairs Council conclusions) or by extending the mandate of NATO's naval counter-terrorism operations. At the same time, consider the unity government's request for an exemption to the embargo.
- **Support the creation of an inclusive Shura council:** Offer political and logistical support to UN efforts to broaden political representation in Libya by setting up a grand Shura council. This would provide a political forum including MPs, mayors, and other local representatives, in support of national reconciliation.

Host partners



Sponsors



LONDON
PARIS
MADRID BERLIN
ROME WARSAW
SOFIA