

# Making Libya's Berlin Process Work

by [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#), [Anas El Gomati \(/experts/anas-el-gomati\)](#)

Jun 21, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/anjah-mlyt-brlyn-bshan-lybya\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](#)

Ben Fishman is a Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.

[Anas El Gomati \(/experts/anas-el-gomati\)](#)

Anas El Gomati is founder and director of the Sadeq Institute in Libya.



Brief Analysis

**To break the political deadlock, begin the withdrawal of disruptive foreign forces, and deploy ceasefire monitors, U.S. officials will need to hold some hard conversations with the UN envoy and all of the international and local actors on the ground.**

On June 23, Germany will host an international meeting on Libya as a follow-up to the January 2020 Berlin conference aimed at ending the country's civil war. Eighteen months later, Libya enjoys a delicate peace and a Government of National Unity (GNU), which was sworn in on March 15 to serve until elections are held at the end of this year. But as preparations for December voting stall, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other foreign ministers headed for Berlin plan to emphasize the core points of UN Security Council Resolution 2570: supporting the GNU, maintaining the ceasefire, holding elections on time, and ensuring that foreign military forces and mercenaries depart soon.

Resolving the constitutional and legal basis for elections is important, so the foreign ministers should not hesitate to press the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) about mediating more effectively among rival domestic actors. Yet the main focus of Berlin II should be international—that is, developing an agreement and timeline for the removal of foreign fighting units before December.

## From Berlin I to Berlin II

The first Berlin conference stemmed from a summer 2019 request by UN envoy Ghassan Salame to Chancellor Angela Merkel about forging international consensus on halting a war that had drawn in regional and global powers. Salame has since described that initiative as an “outside-in” approach, in contrast to UNSMIL's failed “inside-out” national dialogue process that was aborted when Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019.

The January 2020 conference **produced a fifty-five-point communique (<https://unsmil.unmissions.org/berlin-international-conference-libya-19-january-2020>)** on all relevant issues, including a ceasefire endorsement and renewed calls for respecting the long-ignored arms embargo. It also established working groups to unify rival political, economic, and security institutions—a mission they continue to work on today. Yet while several foreign participants in the conflict sent their heads of state or senior ministers to the conference, they promptly ignored the conclusions reached there. The war persisted for nearly six more months, until a Turkish military intervention in support of the Tripoli government compelled Haftar's Russian- and Emirati-backed forces to retreat to central Libya.

The military situation has cooled significantly since then, but Berlin II will occur amid a deadlock over the constitutional basis for holding elections in December. Several questions remain as the July 1 deadline for resolving that impasse approaches—a date that Libya's High National Elections Commission set in order to ensure adequate preparation time for balloting. One key debate is whether to hold a referendum on a draft constitution prior to the elections or pass a temporary law and postpone broader constitutional questions. Another centers on whether to hold direct presidential and parliamentary elections at the same time or allow the elected parliament to select a president. Questions also linger about eligibility requirements for candidates, (e.g., whether they can hold multiple citizenships).

As significant as these decisions are, however, the real question is which body can legitimately authorize them. In November, UNSMIL established

the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), a diverse group of seventy-five members convened to break the political deadlock. After much progress in drawing a transitional roadmap and setting the election date, the most recent LPDF virtual session in May ended without resolving any of the above issues, as participants delivered speeches instead of working toward consensus. Consequently, UN envoy Jan Kubis sent the issue to the House of Representatives (HOR), the rarely convened body whose disputed election helped provoke the 2014-2015 hostilities. By placing the onus on the HOR and its speaker Aguila Saleh—who has long obstructed the political transition and remains under U.S. sanctions for doing so—Kubis effectively stunted whatever progress UNSMIL and the LPDF had achieved earlier this year.

Hence, if Berlin II is to have any impact on holding elections as scheduled, Secretary Blinken and his foreign counterparts will need to have a serious conversation with Kubis and UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres. In addition to reiterating their expectation that UNSMIL play a more effective mediation role, they should press Kubis to re-empower the LPDF when it reconvenes in person on June 28 for a vote on the legal basis for elections, rather than waiting indefinitely for Saleh and the HOR.

## The Problem of Outside Forces

**A**lthough the UN-brokered October ceasefire called for the withdrawal of all non-Libyan forces within ninety days, as many as 20,000 foreign military forces and mercenaries remain in place, many along the Sirte/al-Jufrah axis dividing east from west. Since signing defense and maritime agreements with Libya's former Government of National Accord in late 2019, Turkey has publicly acknowledged sending both military personnel and Syrian mercenaries there. Senior Turkish defense officials now visit Tripoli regularly, and several hundred Turkish officers are involved in training Tripoli-aligned forces. Last week, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly told his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron that he would assent to removing mercenaries but was noncommittal about withdrawing regular forces. Ultimately, Ankara **may show more flexibility (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defining-realistic-policy-toward-erdogans-turkey-advice-biden-administration>)** on its military posture if it can preserve its **controversial maritime agreement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/east-mediterranean-energy-rivalries-face-harsh-economic-realities>)** and privileged economic position, both of which GNU prime minister Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba has supported.

Turkish activity stands in contrast to Haftar's patrons in Russia and the United Arab Emirates, who continue to deny any military involvement despite sending thousands of mercenaries there—including Syrian and Sudanese nationals, according to the UN Panel of Experts. **A 2020 U.S. defense report (<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/04/2002546287/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20IG%20EAST%20AFRICA%20AND%20NORTH%20AND%20WEST%20AFRICA%20COUNTERTERRORISM%20OPERATIONS.PDF>)** suggested that the UAE may be funding the local deployment of the Wagner Group, Russia's top private military contractor. Haftar's backers have no formal political agreements with Libyan authorities, making their numbers, location, and withdrawal prospects difficult to determine. One detail is clear: mercenaries now control much of the oil infrastructure in the critical Sirte Basin.

Hence, the main challenge for Berlin II will be putting meat on the bones of the oft-repeated international call for removing foreign forces. Without accurately accounting for which actors are on the ground (at least privately among conference participants), the parties will have difficulty sequencing an actual withdrawal. A phased pullback may be feasible, focusing first on repatriating all remaining Syrian and Sudanese nationals within a month. Concurrently, the United States, Germany, and France should speak with Turkey about internationalizing their respective training programs for Libyan military forces, first by placing their demining work under a UN umbrella. They can also take advantage of the recent improvement in Turkish-Egyptian relations to suggest that Ankara play a role in the Cairo-led Libyan military unification talks.

However it is accomplished, the goal of pulling back foreign forces from the Sirte/al-Jufrah axis is essential to preserving the ceasefire's long-term viability. The deployment of unarmed UNSMIL ceasefire monitors remains in the planning stages, with authorities still awaiting guidance from the Joint Military Commission made up of rival Libyan factions. To fill this gap, participants at Berlin II could agree to deploy temporary monitors before UNSMIL finalizes a permanent mission, with the United States offering intelligence and transportation support to this multilateral effort. Initially, any monitors must be military-grade soldiers equipped to defend themselves, and the Libyans need to acknowledge this reality.

The most challenging actor remains Russia, whose Wagner forces played a destructive role in the Tripoli war and **are laying roots (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa>)** in key strategic areas, including al-Jufrah Air Base. Readouts from President Biden's recent summit with Vladimir Putin suggest that Libya was briefly mentioned as a potential point of strategic cooperation. Under that rubric, the United States and its partners should put their desire for more predictable Russian relations to the test in Berlin, asking Moscow to not only recommit to Resolution 2570, but also redeploy at least some forces to Benghazi, just as it redeployed to central Libya when Haftar retreated from Tripoli. At the same time, Washington should identify and discourage all funding to Wagner's operations in Libya, which will likely require a blunt conversation with the UAE.

## Conclusion

**B**erlin II presents a much-needed opportunity to push forward on two of Libya's most-pressing questions: how to proceed with elections, and how to reduce the presence of foreign forces. Both issues will require quiet dialogue and tough diplomacy on the practical steps outlined above—an approach that would have far greater impact than another fifty-point vision statement that is swiftly ignored. The sooner Secretary Blinken begins these hard conversations with the UN and his bilateral counterparts, the sooner Libya will see meaningful withdrawals, the arrival of ceasefire monitors, and timely elections.

*Ben Fishman is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and former director for North Africa at the National Security Council. Anas El Gomati is*

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response](#)

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)

♦  
Ido Levy,  
Craig Whiteside

[\(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region](#)

Feb 9, 2022

♦  
Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

[\(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display](#)

Feb 9, 2022

♦  
Carol Silber

[\(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)