

The Erosion of Public Trust in Libya's International Unification Efforts

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Aug 10, 2026

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Brief Analysis

Libyans are increasingly questioning where governance reforms fit into the agendas of Libyan elites' engagement with the parallel UNSMIL 2025 roadmap and Boulos initiative.

Since 2011 and the death of Muammar Qadhafi, Libyan politicians have repeatedly promised the Libyan people that they would work toward state-building, justice, national reconciliation, and prosperity to transform Libya into “another Dubai.” Likewise, international efforts to facilitate state-building and a unified Libya date back over a decade, with two parallel initiatives currently taking place in Libya to help mediate between the country’s rival eastern and western political camps. The [2025 roadmap of UNSMIL \(///C:/Users/User/Downloads/unsmil.unmissions.org/en/political-roadmap%3f\)](https://www.unsmil.unmissions.org/en/political-roadmap%3f), the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, and the [Boulos initiative \(https://www.ft.com/content/f5c43a41-3fa1-486e-a592-7933bc1bdcbb?\)](https://www.ft.com/content/f5c43a41-3fa1-486e-a592-7933bc1bdcbb), proposed by U.S. Arab affairs adviser Massad Boulos in April, are the latest efforts to bridge this divide between Libyan elites from east and west.

Yet Libya continues to look like an arena in which competing family businesses each claim to represent the best interests of the Libyan people, the country’s true stakeholders, while actually excluding them. For most Libyans, the most tangible aspect of these processes has been the high-level international meetings they involve, which are often presented as signs of progress toward unification in and of themselves. Increasingly, Libyans see this elite engagement in international mediation initiatives as performative rather than constructive. Moreover, they understand that elites stand to gain personally from the focus on international investment in the Boulos initiative.

If discussions about the country’s future maintain public focus on a series of arrangements and business deals among powerful families, political networks, and international intermediaries rather than tangible progress toward elected institutions or popular participation, public confidence in these international efforts toward a unified Libya will continue to erode.

A Tale of Two Tracks

The UNSMIL roadmap, announced in August 2025, is backed by the international community, including the United States and the [UN Security Council \(https://press.un.org/en/blog/sc16389\)](https://press.un.org/en/blog/sc16389). Led by Hanna Tetteh, the special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) for Libya, the roadmap aims to end Libya's prolonged political transition through a sequenced, three-pillar approach to be implemented within twelve to eighteen months: 1) adopting a technically sound and politically viable electoral framework for presidential and parliamentary elections; 2) reunifying Libya's divided institutions by establishing a new unified interim government with a time-bound mandate to prepare the country for elections; and 3) a broad structured dialogue involving political actors, civil society, women, youth, and other stakeholders to address governance, security, economic reform, and national reconciliation.

Now running in parallel to the UNSMIL roadmap, the subsequently announced Boulos initiative is part of his efforts to broker a power-sharing arrangement among Libya's rival factions and attract international investment, particularly from American companies. Boulos has described the initiative as a short-term, U.S.-facilitated roadmap intended to complement the UNSMIL process rather than replace it.

A Question of Legitimacy

On the one hand, the UNSMIL roadmap has received buy-in from key Libyan political figures who have participated in previous versions of the UN mediation process. These include Mohamed Menfi, head of the Libyan Presidential Council (PC); Aguila Saleh, speaker of the House of Representatives (HOR); and Mohamed Takala, head of the High State Council (HSC). However, the process has also been challenged since its announcement last year, primarily by Libya's rival political authorities and the broader political fragmentation, with external backers also reinforcing resistance to the UN-led process. The roadmap's first two phases stalled amid competing interests and limited UNSMIL political leverage on the ground. This has led the SRSG to bypass the first two phases—"Unified Government Institutions" and "Electoral Framework"—and move directly to the "Structured Dialogue" phase in an attempt to achieve something before the roadmap's end date.

This phase included more than 120 Libyan participants and generated nearly 600 specific recommendations covering governance, security, the economy, and national reconciliation. Although governance was addressed in the 600 recommendations, full consensus was elusive, and the recommendations were met with dissent rather than uniform endorsement. For example, one governance recommendation included the proposal of a new unified executive authority to replace the existing divided "transitional" executive structures over the subsequent 18–24 months.

But participants clashed over whether creating another transitional arrangement would simply prolong Libya's transition rather than help achieve the roadmap's main objective of ending the transitional phase in Libya. The dialogue participants later expressed concerns about the roadmap, stating that the recommendations showed that Tetteh was not serious about developing viable solutions by failing to require a finalized or unanimous agreement from the dialogue participants, leaving the recommendations without clear weight and with an outline only toward a new type of transitional government instead of the end to the transitional governments that the framework had initially promised. Since Boulos announced his initiative in June, critics have also argued that Tetteh has found herself at an impasse due to the widespread attention on the Boulos initiative, instead using the dialogue to compete with it.

The Boulos initiative has also received buy-in from several key political actors in Libya, including Khalifa Haftar, who referred to it as a "unique" development. The weight given to outcomes of this initiative domestically demonstrates the critical role the United States can play given its influence. But its status as a U.S. diplomatic

initiative means it lacks the international mandate of the UNSMIL roadmap, and it has no formal endorsement from the UN Security Council. Its existence has also been understood as a challenge to the SRSF framework despite Boulos's statements otherwise, putting pressure on the process.

Moreover, it does not yet have support from both sides of the conflict: While Haftar's side vocally welcomed the initiative's attempt to unify government institutions, calling it unique, Saleh opposes it, saying that it bypasses legislative institutions. Further, HSC members are divided on the initiative. As both the House of Representatives (HOR) and the High State Council (HSC) possess the legal authority to pass electoral laws and form a unified government, their agreement is essential to ensuring the legitimacy of any nationwide deal or political initiative. These complications have contributed to the Libyan public expressing skepticism about the legitimacy of both initiatives.

Performative Peacebuilding

The ways in which Libyan elites are involving themselves in these processes are proving especially controversial and delegitimizing. The first major concern is the performative aspect of elites' involvement in the processes. Both sides have been highly visible in their engagement; Lt. Gen. Saddam Haftar, deputy general commander of the Libyan National Army, has paid official visits to Jordan, Germany, France, Turkey, and the United States since the beginning of 2026, while Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh has visited Turkey, Italy, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet these trips lack tangible deliverables or concessions from Libyan elites on the key governance issues at stake.

Instead, they produce a steady stream of carefully staged photographs and professionally edited videos for Libyan participants' media channels to celebrate another "successful" visit with a major international figure. With Libyan political discourse increasingly mediated through social media—a primary source for journalists, politicians, analysts, TV and radio stations, and online news outlets—officials in Benghazi and Tripoli actively compete over who can demonstrate the greatest international access. These highly public visits thus primarily appear to benefit Libyan elites by allowing them to demonstrate power, reassure supporters, and demoralize rivals while presenting a veneer of legitimacy to international observers.

These visits are also impacting the unification process, with Saddam Haftar's June 29 trip to Washington, DC (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/06/rubio-hosts-libyas-saddam-hifter-us-pushes-unity-plan-what-know>) being a case in point. Washington remains the most important source of external political recognition in Libya. Haftar's meetings with various senior U.S. officials at the invitation of Boulos—most significantly his publicized meeting (<https://x.com/SecRubio/status/2071681094840119653>) with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio—signaled to many Libyans that Saddam Haftar would be Libya's next head of government given Dbeibeh's lack of a comparable visit. Dbeibeh's subsequent meeting with UAE President Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan (<https://middle-east-online.com/en/uae-president-receives-libya%E2%80%99s-dbeibah-abu-dhabi>) in Abu Dhabi was generally interpreted as a last-resort attempt to receive assistance from the Gulf states in response to Haftar's visit. This has prompted a growing number of Libyans to message below these social media posts "What have you accomplished for us?" as it becomes increasingly clear that accountability for Libya's numerous problems and institutional oversight remains largely absent from these meetings.

The announcements that have come out of these processes are also coming under question. The Boulos initiative's focus on Libya's oil production has raised particular concern given the level of control that elites hold over Libya's oil resources and economy in general. In eastern and southern Libya, not only do Khalifa Haftar, his sons, and their close associates hold military and political power; they also control all major businesses. In addition, the family maintains a strong grip on the oil fields in the territories under their control. Similarly, in western Libya, the security, political, and economic sectors revolve around Prime Minister Dbeibeh, his family members, and their

entrenched circle of loyalists. They control many of the country's most important institutions, including the Central Bank, the NOC, and the High National Elections Commission.

Thus, the memorandums of understanding that have emerged from the Boulos initiative have political undertones. In early 2026, Libya's Government of National Unity signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Boeing to modernize the country's civil aviation sector. The agreement includes support for acquiring modern aircraft, enhancing technical and technological cooperation, upgrading aviation infrastructure to international standards, and advancing plans for a new national carrier as part of a broader U.S.-Libya economic partnership.

In addition, Libya and Chevron signed an agreement in January of this year marking the company's return to the Libyan energy sector after more than a decade. The agreement included an MoU with the NOC to assess Libya's unconventional shale oil and gas potential, estimated at approximately 123 trillion cubic feet of gas and 18 billion barrels of oil. In February, Chevron was awarded an exploration block in the Sirte Basin during Libya's first international licensing round since 2007.

Libyans increasingly view these developments—and the United States government by association—as enabling a political system that confers power via international recognition, business deals, and access, rather than via successful governance. According to the language of the mediation initiatives, these processes are designed to facilitate elections, accountability, and state-building in Libya. Yet if Libyans fail to see progress on these governance issues while the country's political elites reap the benefits of these efforts, popular support for them will continue to dwindle. In other words, continued international engagement with Libya's political status quo is primarily benefiting those with the greatest interest in remaining in power and expanding business opportunities with foreign partners.

So long as Libya's elites retain high-level access to the international community while dodging the responsibilities of governance, they will continue to gain political oxygen while selling an elusive reality to the Libyan people. And if this path continues, international mediation efforts risk encouraging the continuation of Libya's crisis rather than delivering a solution. ♦

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