

Libya Needs Elections, Not Another Leadership Selection

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

Aug 21, 2026

Also published in Al Majalla

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Ben Fishman is the Susan and Leonard Feinstein Senior Fellow in the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on North Africa.



Articles & Testimony

Libyans are fed up with temporary solutions, but Washington's current approach is structured to be just that—another transitional phase that lets political elites keep postponing elections and reform.

On 29 June, Secretary of State Marco Rubio welcomed Saddam Haftar to the seventh floor of the State Department, an unusual place to host a military leader. Despite his record of brutality and intolerance to opposition in Libya's east, Saddam has become one of the primary faces of the Trump administration's initiative to unify Libya.

The American initiative, identified with presidential envoy for Africa Massad Boulos (Tiffany Trump's father-in-law), aims to unify Libya's east and west by selecting leaders from each region to split the top government positions. The Trump administration seeks stability to expand access for American energy companies and increase Libya's oil production. However, naming anyone to be president or prime minister, let alone Saddam Haftar, is a recipe for political chaos.

Since Haftar's Washington visit, many Libyans have opposed the Boulos initiative, an electricity crisis has exposed Libya's poor governance, and an outbreak of fighting in the western city of Zawiya shows the influence militias still have in the country. More fundamentally, the plan would effectively kill another UN-led effort to restore political ownership of Libya to its people.

Libya has suffered from an absence of political legitimacy since the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh has been in office since 2021, when 39 members of the UN-sponsored 74-member Libya Political Dialogue Forum appointed him. He was supposed to serve for a maximum of one year but remains in office today after elections were indefinitely postponed in 2022. Dbeibeh and his influential nephew, Ibrahim, are

the likely counterparts to Saddam under the Boulos plan.

Libya's parliaments, the Eastern-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based High State Council, have even less legitimacy. The Speaker of the House, Aguila Saleh Issa, has been in office since 2014, elected with fewer than 1,000 votes from a tiny district. He has used his outsized role to block political change to the extent that he was sanctioned by the US for obstructing the peace and stability of Libya.

Vicious Cycle

Libya is trapped in a cycle in which political elites block any initiative that would restore political legitimacy to a new government. They cling to power and wealth in a rentier economy with rampant corruption. Outside actors, including neighbours, regional states, and the West, have contributed to Libya's divisions by supporting the warring sides or using their influence to stymie political progress.

Given these challenges, it's little wonder the Trump administration would be tempted to bypass the Libyan people and formalise an arrangement with the country's two main power brokers, the Haftars and the Dbeibehs. However, if the stated goal is power-sharing and unity as a stage in preparation for elections, which Boulos is quick to emphasise, the protagonists could not be more unreliable. Khalifa Haftar launched a war against Tripoli in 2019; his son, official deputy since August 2025, is unlikely to relinquish national power if it is handed to him. Dbeibeh, meanwhile, has already extended his tenure years beyond his initial mandate. Neither is equipped to meet Libyans' basic governance needs, as the current challenges over electricity and inflation show.

What's the alternative? In June, the UN mission in Libya (UNSMIL) completed a "Structured Dialogue" among 120 Libyans that outlined the country's political, economic and security future. The governance group laid out options for determining a constitutional framework and holding elections. A smaller group is working to outline specific electoral law and processes. They meet regularly and recently agreed on how to appoint the chair and members of the election commission. The UN and the dialogue group should finalise arrangements and set an election date. The US and its partners would be better served supporting that process rather than imposing a new political structure that will be even less likely to relinquish authority than the current one.

Economic Reform, Military Unification

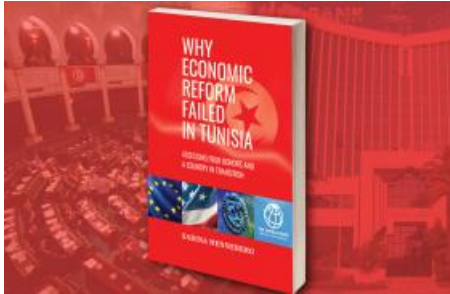
In addition to supporting elections, the US should continue to press for economic reforms and the military unification effort, in which Saddam Haftar has a legitimate role to play. In April, US experts helped negotiate a unified budget for the first time in over a decade. Chaotic spending patterns and unaccountable oil-revenue receipts threatened the stability of the Libyan dinar. The budget is only a first step. It provides top-line figures and essentially caps funds for development projects controlled by the eastern and western development "institutions" who happen to belong to Dbeibehs and Haftars. The US and its partners should continue to press on issues of financial transparency and reforms that will allow Libya's small population to benefit from its oil income instead of suffering from corruption and economic mismanagement.

Second, continuing the military unification efforts will better integrate the Libyan Armed Forces with their Western military counterparts. The US Africa Command hosted a major regional exercise in Libya in April, and the administration continues to advance talks with both sides. Even though there is an imbalance in the reunification discussions since Western security forces include militias as well as a more formal military, the process keeps the sides talking rather than fighting. A further important step would be to disclose weapons acquisitions by both sides. The US should also maintain a close military dialogue with Turkiye and Egypt since they have the most influence on the ground and neither wants another war.

For years, Libyans have insisted that they are fed up with temporary solutions. The US initiative is structured to be just that—another transitional phase that lets political elites permanently postpone elections.

Ben Fishman is the Feinstein Family Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former director for North Africa at the U.S. National Security Council. This article was originally published *on Al Majalla's website* (<https://en.majalla.com/node/332635/opinion/libya-needs-elections-not-another-leadership-selection>). ❖

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