

On Libya Policy, Trump Defers to Europe

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Brief Analysis

Rather than leaving the job to Europe, Washington can articulate a clear Libya policy at the September UN General Assembly meeting, thereby making a political deal more likely to achieve and enforce.

As Ghassan Salamé, the fifth Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya, seeks to stimulate the Libyan peace process, several new international dynamics will affect his efforts. In late July, for example, French president Emmanuel Macron, who aspires to play a leading diplomatic role on Libya, hosted a summit between Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Gen. Khalifa Haftar. In Italy, amid an election season, top foreign and domestic policy issues now center on the migration crisis from Libya. The Qatar dispute in the Gulf, meanwhile, has preoccupied many key supporters of Libya's competing factions. And the Islamic State in Libya threatens to regroup, especially as Maghrebi combatants return home from Syria and Iraq.

If the present course holds, Salamé will not be able to count on active support from Washington, although U.S. diplomats are still engaging with the primary Libyan players. Indeed, neither the White House nor the Department of State has addressed Libya in a meaningful way. This U.S. deprioritization of Libya is perhaps not surprising given the competing domestic and national security challenges occupying the Trump administration -- but it will have a cost if Salamé needs support in brokering a lasting deal among Libya's factions. At a minimum, the United States can help reduce the role of spoilers, including states and terrorist groups. Further, most Libyans view the primary European and Arab actors as unreliable arbiters. Backing Salamé and engaging directly at a senior level on Libya during the upcoming UN General Assembly session, to be held mid-September, represents the best way for the Trump administration to contribute to Libya's much-needed stability.

Macron Seizes the Day

he summit hosted by the French president between Prime Minister Sarraj and General Haftar, who commands

The Libyan National Army, took place July 25 outside Paris. Macron had previewed the meeting after hosting U.S. president Donald Trump two weeks earlier, promising "a number of diplomatic initiatives, strong ones." Still, much of the international community was caught off guard by Macron's plan, the format of the meetings, and the praise he lavished on Haftar, whom Macron welcomed with kisses, as posted on the French president's Twitter feed. It was the first time Haftar had been welcomed in a Western capital and treated on a par with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), which he refuses to join. Previously, Haftar and Serraj had met in Abu Dhabi in May, with each party quickly denying what was reportedly agreed upon. Similarly, the Egyptians failed to broker an agreement between the two in February. The Egyptians remain strong backers of Haftar and, so far, have not demonstrated a commitment to an inclusive political solution for Libya.

A key player on Libya policy will be French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who served as defense minister in France's last government. During his tenure in the Defense Ministry, France lost three special forces troops in Libya's east who were reportedly working with Haftar. Le Drian, a hawk in French military efforts in North Africa and the Sahel, told *La Matinale du Monde* a month prior to the Paris summit, "Like Prime Minister Sarraj, General Haftar is part of the solution." This phrasing upgraded Haftar's importance from playing a "role" in a political agreement to being equivalent to the head of the GNA in stabilizing Libya.

After the summit, the French issued a ten-point statement agreed to by both parties. It opened encouragingly, "The solution to the Libya crisis can only be a political one and requires a national reconciliation process involving all Libyans." Yet Haftar quickly walked back an important agreement to implement a ceasefire, clarifying that the ceasefire would not apply to fighting "extremists," the term he uses to define most of his potential rivals.

Even more problematic may be the ninth point of the joint statement, a commitment to hold presidential and parliamentary elections "as soon as possible." Elections without a more feasible security plan and political agreement are unlikely to deliver actual stability. In particular, many analysts argue that disputes over the legitimacy of Libya's 2012 and 2014 parliamentary votes only increased instability -- especially the latter, which helped fueled Libya's civil war. Moreover, a direct presidential election has not occurred since Qadhafi's fall and could be a vehicle for reprised strongman rule, likely reflecting Haftar's ambition. Although the High National Elections Commission, with United Nations assistance, is technically capable of overseeing a vote, the key challenges for Salamé as he tries to use the Paris statement as a basis to revive the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement will involve sequencing. Can there be a formula for legitimizing the Presidential Council in Tripoli, involving the eastern-based House of Representatives, and advancing a constitutional dialogue before holding elections?

Italy's Migrant Crisis

Given its geographic proximity, energy links, and historical ties to Libya, Italy has always viewed the North African country as central to its foreign policy. On Macron's public effort and his elevation of Haftar, the Italians evinced skepticism. When Salamé, who attended the French summit, made his first trip to Rome after the Paris summit, Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano stressed, "There have been too many negotiations and too many negotiators up to now. Every country should rely on [Salamé's] action."

Italy is also focused on the migration issue. On August 2, the Italian parliament approved a plan to deploy the Italian navy to assist Libyans in countering human traffickers responsible for illegal migration. Italian defense minister Roberta Pinotti said that Italy will "provide logistical, technical, and operational support for Libyan naval vessels, helping them and supporting them in shared and coordinated actions." The Italian mission provoked some domestic protests in Libya -- not surprising given the scrutiny with which Libyan nationalists always regard the former colonial power. Serraj subsequently denied soliciting the Italian operation, and Haftar threatened to fire on warships violating Libya's sovereignty. Additionally, international NGOs have criticized the horrific conditions in Libya's

detention facilities, which the GNA does not have the influence to improve. Although total 2017 migrant crossings to Italy approximate the levels at this point last year -- around 100,000 -- the last six weeks have witnessed a marked decline, possibly the result of more-active Libyan interception efforts. The International Organization for Migration has recorded more than 2,400 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean so far this year. A long-term solution to the migrant crisis remains elusive considering the hardships from which sub-Saharan migrants are fleeing and Libyans' inability to effectively police their own borders.

Where Is U.S. Policy?

The Trump administration has yet to articulate a policy on Libya, as with many other second-tier issues. In April, the president said, "I do not see a role in Libya," although he emphasized that getting rid of the Islamic State remained a priority. Nor has Secretary of State Rex Tillerson addressed Libya substantively. Three days after the Paris summit, the State Department spokesperson released a tepid endorsement, suggesting that the White House did not coordinate with the French government on Macron's initiative. The statement read, "While the Libyan people must lead the process of achieving political reconciliation in their country, the international community plays an important role in supporting those efforts." Similarly, the U.S. embassy to Libya, operating from Tunis, highlighted on August 10 that Ambassador Peter Bodde is engaged with Serraj and Haftar and had met both in the prior week in Tunis and Amman, respectively. Notably, the embassy stressed that the commander of U.S. Africa Command, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, had not met with Haftar, an attempt to deny rumors that the U.S. military is working with Haftar and his forces.

A September Opportunity

The annual UN General Assembly meeting in New York provides an opportunity to both advance the Libyan peace process and assert a clear U.S. policy toward Libya. First, any multilateral gathering on Libya should not include Haftar unless he agrees unmistakably to place his forces under civilian control. He should not be treated as a head of state, as he was in Paris, without ceding something significant in return in negotiations. Second, Tillerson -- and not a deputy -- should attend any meeting on Libya and articulate a U.S. vision for the country's future. So long as Washington fails to convey a definitive policy for Libya, the various Libyan factions will interpret U.S. silence as benefiting their parochial interests. Finally, the administration should host Serraj in Washington and focus on implementing a few key projects that the GNA remains unable to address, including provisioning of consistent electricity and water supplies and alleviating the banking and liquidity crisis. Such a visit, which Serraj did not make during the Obama administration, would help strengthen Salamé's position as he tries to craft a formula that will help stabilize Libya.

Ben Fishman, an associate fellow of The Washington Institute, served as director for North Africa on the National Security Council staff from 2011 to 2013. ❖

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